Commercial Libraries in an Indian City: an Ethnographic Sketch

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In this report of research currently underway on libraries in the city of Pune, Maharashtra (India), the focus is on commercial, street-corner libraries. Using an ethnographic approach, this research explores the way these libraries function, and the values placed on reading by Pune's middle class library users. Commercial libraries seem to have occupied a niche not filled by the public libraries in Pune, that of providing current popular fiction and glossy magazines in convenient locations. The libraries have a variety of origins and motivations, but are typically run with only the most rudimentary of cataloging and shelving systems, and no reference functions at all. Patrons describe their reading activity as leisure, and name television viewing as the main alternative or competing activity.

Introduction

Visitors walking around the neighborhoods of Maharashtrian cities and towns will notice, if they are so inclined, small shop fronts or stalls here and there displaying racks of popular books and magazines, some of them quite faded and dog-eared. The visitors may well mistake these places for used-book stalls. If they stop to chat with the proprietors, however, they will be told that the items are not for sale, but available to paying members to be borrowed. These pocket-sized institutions call themselves "libraries" in English, or use equivalent words in Marathi (vachanalaya, granthalaya).

American or European librarians with a relatively fixed understanding of what a library is might dismiss these as not "really" libraries, but rather some sort of business, similar to used-book stalls or to commercial tape and video rental services. [1] Further exploration, however, has made it clear that while these are indeed commercial ventures, they do offer some services that are similar to those of public lending libraries. These commercial libraries are one focus of a nine-month research project in the city of Pune, Maharashtra during the academic year 2003–2004. [2]

Overview of libraries in Pune

The metropolitan area of Pune [3] has an estimated population of over 5 million, but the city retains its older neighborhoods and the aura of an intellectual center. Pune is the home of one large and various smaller universities, as well as colleges, schools and various research institutes on topics ranging from Sanskrit to astrophysics. Not surprisingly, Pune also has a large number of libraries.

In India, the first popular libraries (as opposed to personal, administrative or temple collections) were introduced by the British for their own personnel. In Pune, the first popular library was a "station library" run by the Poona Library Society for East India Company employees, apparently only from 1823 to 1829 (Garde 2000, 299). Other libraries were soon formed, however, including the Native General Library, established in 1848 by the British and in 1921 renamed the Pune Nagar Vachan Mandir or Pune City Library (still in operation), the Pune Marathi Library (established 1911 and still in operation) and Orphan Students' Hall (established 1912, now Pune Students' Hall), the Shree Ram Free Reading Hall (established 1914, now closed) and the Maharashtra Free Read-

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ing Hall (established 1915, now closed) (Garde 2000, 299–302).

Preliminary reading of the secondary literature on libraries in Pune suggests that from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s there were three main threads of library activity. First, and probably the most active and the least documented, were the intellectuals and political leaders who created their own private collections. These collections generally are only noted when they are later donated. In his essay on Pune libraries, P. K. Garde (2000, 308–309) mentions as library donors the names of most of the intellectuals in Maharashtra, including Lokmanya Tilak, R. J. Bhandarkar and Irrawati Karve. Second, there were various efforts to found popular Marathi language libraries and reading rooms, initially as part of the struggle for independence and later in the effort to promote citizenship through literacy. Third, as universities, colleges and schools were founded, their libraries were also established.

In 1967 the passage of the Public Libraries Act established a statewide system for library registration and funding. All non-profit libraries that met certain standards in maintaining their governing boards, collections, budgets and records as well as public access were granted A, B or lower grade status within this system, and were made eligible for annual grants to cover salaries and collection development. Obviously, commercial libraries fell outside this system.

It is not easy to determine how many libraries there are currently in Pune. [4] Information has been gleaned from a number of incomplete lists, directories and word of mouth. [5] Based on this, the following extremely approximate numbers of libraries for the city may be estimated:

State Registered Public Libraries (non-profit)	50
School Libraries	20
College or University Libraries	10
Professional Education Libraries (law, commerce, medical, etc.)	20
Libraries Associated with Research Institutes or Trusts	30
Newspaper Archives and City Archives	3
Foreign Sponsored Libraries (French, German, British)	3
TOTAL estimated number of non-commercial libraries	136

None of these libraries are freely open to the public beyond their newspaper reading areas. All, including those registered as public, require registration and the payment of fees. Many require letters of introduction.

When discussing reading institutions in Pune, it also seems necessary to mention the role of the many local publishers, some of which simultaneously maintain commercial libraries, bookshops or showrooms. The 2003 Publisher's Directory for Pune lists approximately 435 different publishers in the Pune area (Prakashan Jagat 2003).

Finally, there are the commercial libraries, the main focus of this study. There do not appear to be any published discussions of these institutions, nor is there published information available on their origins, functions, or relations to similar institutions. The Maharashtra state government does not register commercial libraries. The annual publisher directories in Pune only list approximately 15 commercial libraries. In his essay on Pune libraries, Garde (2000, 313) states that commercial libraries have never been surveved, but he estimates their number to be 150. Research as of February 2004 has identified approximately 30 commercial libraries in Pune, but it is likely that this is indeed only a quarter of the actual number.

Justification for the study of commercial libraries

From the mere numbers alone, no matter if they are approximate, it is still obvious that Pune is a city with a remarkably large number of libraries. There has been very little research, however, on the history or significance of these institutions. In general, little is known about how library use or reading itself may relate to social class, gender, neighborhood, or other political and cultural interests. Not much is published on what people are reading, or on how libraries operate in relation to other forms of information flow, such as book stalls and exhibitions, religious, literary and arts societies, literacy programs, cinema, television, or the Internet. This research project was designed to create some baseline data and starting points for further research into these topics.

This research should also meet a practical need. In order to construct feasible development programs, planners should know what libraries, their patrons, and the larger reading public need in their particular socio-cultural context. Yet most of the sociological studies of users and their needs have been done in American libraries (Durrance 2001; Hall 1995; Kranich 2001). Without any Indian data about the identities, practices and needs of potential library users, planners are forced to rely on their own assumptions and common sense alone. The same questions are essential for scholars, writers, publishers, and other responsible officials to inform their distinct concerns for how a diverse public obtains and uses published texts and for how different media of cultural expression and transmission may compete.

It is in part for this practical reason that this project focuses on commercial libraries. Since they are operated for profit, these libraries must respond to consumer demand. Therefore, we begin with the assumption that the existence of commercial libraries, their holdings and their routines will directly reflect the interests and needs of a certain sector of readers. Presumably, if these readers' needs had been met by non-profit libraries (which are less costly to the user), there would be no scope for the commercial ones.

Ethnography in the study of libraries

This paper offers notes and observations, not a finished analysis. In addition to the specifics of libraries in Pune, it will lay out the ethnographic mindset with which the topic has been approached.

By ethnography is meant an approach that takes into account the holistic, systemic nature of institutions, and one that explores meaning within a social structure. Locating meaning within a social structure is particularly important in order to avoid the risk of a vaguely "cultural" study that, having no context, easily falls into essentialist, teleological pseudo-explanations along the lines of "they do it because it is their culture." Methodologically, ethnography does not address these sociological questions through study of statistical summaries and generalized data, but rather through the study of particular, historical practices of actual institutions and people in real time.

Ethnography is a means to study libraries not as freestanding, isolated institutions within which information and people circulate, but rather as social institutions that are enmeshed in larger systems of economy, social relations and values. It is to study not just what occurs within libraries, but rather how libraries function in society. Like museums, libraries are complex institutions whose personnel and technologies mediate formal and informal practices of learning, entertainment and communication. In recent years scholars have begun to explore ethnographically the uses of exhibitions, museums and archives (For example, Falk and Dierking 1995; Lowenthal 1998; Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996; Moore 1997; Steedman 2001), but similar critical glances have rarely landed on libraries. A few scholars have undertaken interactive observations of users or librarians within particular libraries, which they term ethnographic (Nardi and O'Day 1996; Pedersen, Espinola, and Huston 1991; Pendleton and Chatman 1998). This form of extended observation, however, does not consider the larger social or cultural context in which the libraries and their participants function.

Library studies would benefit from broader ethnographic research that places libraries in communities and societies. The research that comes close to this point of view is that of Joan Durrance and her colleagues (1995, 2001), who study the actual uses to which citizens put their public libraries. Even in these studies, however, the American social context is generally taken for granted.

In India, ethnographers must take a step back and ask basic questions first. What, in actual practice, do people use libraries for? Who uses them (by age, gender, social class and caste)? What values are attached to libraries and library use? How do libraries and reading operate in relation to other practices of cultural information flow, such as story-telling, lectures, sermons, song, and drama, and to competition from book stalls, social clubs, museums, government literacy and uplift programs, cinema, television, or Internet cafes?

This research is an attempt to ask these questions in a particular place and time, not to answer them for once and for all, but to generate a representation that can be further tested, explored and compared to other places and times. Since the research is ongoing, this particular paper reports only on one aspect of the research: commercial libraries. The research relies on a combination of methods: observation, focused individual in-

terviews, informal conversations, a survey of basic information from each library visited, and the collection of member data from sample libraries. The survey information includes the library's location in the city, date of founding, current number of members, current size of book and magazine collections, languages of the collections, hours of operation, amount (if any) of seating, fee structure, and number of employees. The member data collected includes gender, location of residence, date of joining, and the number of books and magazines borrowed within a specific time period.

Since this is an exploratory study, it does not strictly adhere to a limited set of queries, but is open-ended. To begin, questions were posed concerning the nature of the libraries (location, age, organization and rules, record-keeping systems, nature of the collection, members etc.), and then the perspective of library proprietors, workers and members were sought on broader topics such as the relation of reading to lifestyle, the value of different kinds of reading material, the reading habits of various different age groups and the future of libraries.

Preliminary observations: motives for founding commercial libraries

The oldest commercial library in Pune that is still running appears to be one Abhinav Pustak Mandir. It was founded as a family business in 1948 conveniently close to Fergusson College, and offered Marathi books for sale as well as on loan. Many people who studied in Pune remember the social as well as literary pleasures of stopping by to talk about books.

It is slightly confusing that the institutions such as Abhinav and five or six others founded in the 1950s are often interchangeably called libraries and bookshops or book centers. Neither the owners nor the patrons at that time saw any sharp difference between these two functions. For example, Popular Books was founded in 1954, offering English books both for sale and as loans. Popular Books originally operated as a counter within a coffee shop, and claims to be the first library offering current English fiction. It catered to a group of students who gathered daily at the coffee shop to discuss culture. Currently the library offers English and Marathi fiction and maga-

zines. It is run in a shed behind the bookshop. The personnel and functions of the library and the book shop have been separated to the point that the librarian complained to me of the impudence of patrons who asked if they couldn't arrange to borrow an expensive book currently available in the shop but not in the library. Popular Books library has changed in other ways too. Patrons have shifted their demands to pulp fiction and popular magazines. There is no facility for seating, let alone a coffee shop, and no effort to support cultural or literary exchanges. The librarian explained that the library and the shop alike simply provide what the consumers demand. Some people cannot afford to buy all the newest fiction, or do not want to own books that they will only read once and never re-visit, so for them there is the library. Since the 1950s, then, what had been a single book-providing service through sales or loans has shifted into two quite separate functions, with separate spaces, personnel and budgets.

As a result of their entrepreneurial nature, these library businesses sometimes grew in unpredictable ways. Vidya Commerce Library (founded 1972), for instance, loans books and texts for law and commerce students, but expanded to publish its own texts and study guides, as well as to offer various services to career-seekers such as the preparation of CV and job applications, and preinterview counseling. Abhinav Pustak Mandir (roughly, New Book Temple) has shifted most of its business to stationary and textbook sales. The owner now does not keep any books for the library. He lends magazines, and it will still lend a textbook from the stock to be sold for a deposit at the value of the book plus a fee taken from the deposit when the book is returned.

Of the 22 commercial libraries from which enough information has been gathered, four combine library services with used or new books sales in the same space; three are associated with a bookshop or publisher (same owner and name but separate space); six with other kinds of sales (dry food goods, dairy outlet, stationary and school supplies, desktop publishing and career guidance, paper scrap recycling, bus reservations); two offer a few non-reading items such as spice packets or home-made jam for sale on the counter; while seven offer nothing except book and magazine lending.

When queried about the reasons for starting a library, the owners all began by stating that they had always loved books and reading, or that their family was already in the business of writing or publishing. The founder of Popular Books explained that he was working as a librarian at Poona University, and had started his business because "books are in my family," mentioning brothers in academia and in journalism (Gadgil, interview). Another man who founded a library in his family dairy outlet explained that he was an addicted reader and that his father, annoyed at such an apparently wasteful activity, suggested he run the library as a way to gain some profit from his habit (Jagtap, interview).

These male owners of the first generation of commercial libraries set up their systems from scratch, often inventing as they went along. Even today there is variation in methods of book registration, membership and book cards, and shelf order. Most register each new book in a running registry and assign it a sequential accession number. No classification systems were set up, either because the owner did not know about them or because the number of books in the collections did not merit it

There was also some experimentation in fees. Most of the libraries charge some combination of an initial joining fee, an annual or monthly fee, plus a deposit. One library, now closed, is said to have pioneered the method of charging higher loan fees for the books with the highest demand, and lower fees for the less popular books (Mahajan, interview).

Despite the entrepreneurial tone, the owners of these libraries prefer to emphasize above all their love for and respect of books rather than their business interests. Some go to great lengths to select their collections and to know their readers well enough to make suitable recommendations. The Phoenix library, founded in 1959 in one of the oldest sections of the city, stands out in this regard. The owner, who does not come from an academic background, nonetheless keeps close tabs on every review and book-related publication available to him. As in most libraries, he has his books rebound with hard bindings, but in a process that appear to be unique, he augments his books by binding related clippings into the front matter of the book.

By 1982 a number of libraries were founded and run by women. It is possible that there were earlier women-founded commercial libraries that have since closed, but no evidence for them has come to light, nor, given the economic and social mores of the time, would it have been likely. [6] The women owners also state their love of books as the first reason for starting a library, but the other reason, which they would only give indirectly, was to keep themselves busy with a reputable activity. Libraries have some association with educated classes that mere retail marketing does not, and can serve a social function for middle class women who may be otherwise bored by their household duties. For example, one woman explained that she had been a partner of a "chitfund" and in that context offered enameled pots and deluxe kitchen items at discount to the monthly winners. When a storefront in her housing complex became available, she and her partner pooled their personal book collections of a few hundred volumes to start a library. They also use the space to sell spice mixes and jam, and they charge a small fee to anyone who would like to post announcements in their window. The library is a social place, the owner explained, where people can leave messages for each other or just drop by to say hello. Her main pleasure is in meeting the people who come by the library. Two other women-run libraries are, oddly enough, situated right next door to each other in a not particularly dense area. The explanation each woman gave was that she did not choose the location, but simply took on the space made available when her husband's business expanded elsewhere. Despite the different ownership logic, the content of these women-run libraries is not different from the other commercial libraries, nor is membership more heavily female.

Preliminary observations: services of commercial libraries

The commercial libraries in Pune held book collections ranging in size from 400 books to 30,000. The actual numbers are difficult to obtain, however, as not all the libraries maintained complete accession registers. The accession registers generally list in chronological order the title, author, publisher and price of the book, and give the accession number or classification number, if there is one. Systems for giving books classification codes vary. Some libraries give the first letter of the

author's surname and then a sequential number. One woman has attempted to create her own categories for the English books (all the Marathi books just got a sequential number), assigning each book a category letter and then a sequential number. The categories included F-fiction, L-love, Th-thriller, Au-autobiography and biography, W-western, Hr-horror, As-Asterix, Tin-Tintin, ND-Nancy Drew, etc.

Shelving is never by accession number. English and Marathi books are kept separately. Within the language groups the books may be divided roughly into genre (novels, romance, poetry). Books by a single author are usually grouped together, but only a few libraries tried to keep an alphabetical sequence on the shelf from one author to the next. For example, in the same library where the English books had been given category letters, a fiction (F-) shelf held books by Campbell Armstrong, Sylvia Nasar, Daphne Dumaurier, and Clyde Phillips, following neither principles of alphabetization nor any numerical sequence. All the fiction books in both languages were arbitrarily shelved. Clerks asked how they could find a book if a patron asked for a particular author said that they make sure to shelve them so that the spines are out (some libraries do not bother to do this), and so they can find them by looking. In two cases, however, the author found English books shelved partially alphabetically by the first letter of the author's first name.

Non-fiction is hardly available in commercial libraries, except a limited number of biographies and travel stories. Self-help books claim a large space in the bookshops, but when queried, librarians stated that library books should be those that people would read once and not want to keep at home, whereas people would want to buy and keep self-help, health, and cookery books. One librarian suggested that such books were not financially attractive, being both more expensive and more likely to be stolen. Library owners did not see any value in offering books that people might want to consult more than once, although their logic was difficult to follow. They saw more value in genres such as romance that will be read once by a large number of people than a nonfiction work that would be read by a smaller number of people over a longer period of time. They were equally dismissive of old books. Religious books too, aside from the newest lectures of a fashionable guru, were dismissed as something people would want to own and consult regularly, not borrow from a library.

No reference services are available in these libraries. They understand their function entirely as the medium through which books and magazines are circulated, not as an information resource. No commercial library offers encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs or similar reference materials. Sometimes, however, a librarian will try to help. College students are usually assigned a "project" that entails creating an illustrated poster on a general topic, and they often go to used-book stalls to buy old magazines to clip for this purpose. One day a pair of girls wandered into a library, perhaps not understanding its function, asking for information about France. The helpful librarian went to the adjoining bookstore for the Lonely Planet Guide to France and allowed the girls informally (without library membership) to borrow it for half an hour in order to photocopy the relevant pages before returning it to the book-

There is a great disparity among library owners and clerks as to their ability to recommend books. One the one extreme are the few owners who have read most of what is in their collections and can readily suggest titles of interest to particular readers. On the other there are clerks with 10th grade education who can only pull books down from the shelf that seem to have similar cover illustrations. Once a patron asked a clerk for another Michael Crichton or a related book, only to be offered Danielle Steele, because the cover design was similar. At a combined bookstall and library, a clerk was queried about purchasing a Sanskrit-Hindi dictionary. Not knowing one language from another, she grabbed the first dictionary she could find, which happened to be Hindi-English, and offered this to the patron. Despite their limited literary knowledge or even English literacy, a majority of the clerks and library owners take pride in knowing the members' numbers, and also their tastes and interests. Some clerks will hold back certain new magazines or books to show to particular members known to appreciate them.

Generally, however, patrons do not expect any assistance from the libraries. Regular patrons typically come into the library without greeting anyone, place their returned item on the counter,

murmur their member number and immediately turn to browse the stack of recent magazines or books. Often their attention is so limited that they did not even notice that a foreigner was sitting behind the desk instead of the usual clerk. On selecting the book and taking it to the counter to be checked out, they may exchange a few words, but usually the transaction involves less conversation than a purchase at a shop. If there is chat, conversations are likely to be about family, health or other topics unrelated to reading.

Preliminary observations: readers and reading habits

Since the survey of members is still incomplete, only general observations of the most obvious characteristics of commercial library users can be offered here.

There is not a major imbalance in the gender of library members, but it appears that men and women do read differently. The clerks said that women are more likely to read magazines, including literary magazines, and short stories. This is attributed to the fact that women rarely have long stretches of free time, and have to read in short snatches between chores. Men are said to read more books, and to prefer to work methodically through the entire oeuvre of one author before moving on to the next. In observation, however, it appeared that most men were checking out news, film and business magazines, not literature.

The library users were almost entirely middle class or above (based on dress, speech and reference to professions or education). The few times someone from the servant classes appeared in a library it always turned out that he or she was picking up a book for an employer. The only partial exception to this rule is the set of readers from elite Brahmin backgrounds who had declined into genteel poverty but maintained their taste for reading.

Owners and members are all in complete agreement that reading has declined in the last 10–15 years. They immediately cite television viewing, particularly since the availability of cable service, as the main cause. As one pediatrician commented, mothers used to yell and yell to get their kids to come inside from playing, but now they have to nag them to go outside. Other rea-

sons given for the perceived decline in reading include the Internet, more women working, reduced commuting time for people who have moved out of the center of town into residential rings and increased leisure travel. Films, which have been an entertainment feature longer than television in Pune, and are often mentioned as the cause of moral decline, are rarely mentioned as a cause in the decline of reading. A library proprietor dismissed films as a factor because they are not daily or home-based entertainment. People will often add to their commentary that they are not against the television, that indeed channels such as Discovery or National Geographic are quite educational. Television is understood, however, as in direct competition with reading for the attention of children and adults.

There is an ongoing debate in middle-class households of Pune concerning the relative value of Marathi-medium or English-medium schools, and this debate colors some opinions about reading. Those who believe that children will learn better in their first language also tend to bemoan the fact that most of the preferred children's books are in English. Those supporting Englishmedium as the quicker path to success worry that their children do not get into the habit of reading in Marathi.

The choice of reading in commercial libraries is remarkably uniform, particularly among the English titles. It is possible that this is due more to the limited offerings of the distributors than to the demands of the readers, but no library owner expressed any concern over the selection. The heaviest use is not of books at all, but of glossy magazines. These include Marathi and English news and business weeklies, women's monthly magazines, and various monthlies aimed at particular consumer markets (motorbike owners, photography hobbyists, etc).

Preferred books are fiction, primarily romance or adventure. There is a significant set of young women who read nothing except Mills and Boon romances, for example, while men and women alike snap up the works of Jeffrey Archer, Sydney Sheldon and Danielle Steele. Marathi readers also prefer romance and adventure, but there is a much greater availability of and interest in literary fiction as well.

There is a marked preference for new books. Some of the older libraries have substantial collections built up over the years, but these books are only touched by a few dedicated readers. The vast majority of patrons completely ignore older books in favor of the newest releases. In addition to the fact that older pulp fiction does tend to get dated, there is the fact that the books are packed onto dusty, inaccessible shelves or boxes, often without even having the spine displayed, completely uninviting.

Reasons people give for coming to a particular library are primarily its convenient location (either to home or to office) and secondarily that the library stocks the items that person wants to read in a timely way so they don't have to wait too long for them. Owners usually boast about their quick accession as the reason their library is preferable to another; failing this they will claim to have a better selection.

If asked for their reasons for reading, patrons usually describe their reading as a way to pass time, or for pleasure. Men taking magazines say that it is important to keep up with news. Adult women checking out Mills and Boone romances are often a little embarrassed and sometimes give explanations such as their need to relax during a stressful time. No one mentioned self-improvement as a motivation for reading, not even improvement of English skills.

Patrons also do not expect access through a cataloguing system, although some do ask to consult the register to see what the newest purchases have been. There is also no expectation of any shelf order, especially since many libraries simply place all the newest or most popular books on a single counter or display case for easy access. There is no expectation that a book on a particular topic can be searched for, other than by asking the clerk to try to remember where it might be.

Implications

Preliminary observations suggest that middleclass consumers of reading matter in Pune do not strongly distinguish between commercial libraries and bookshops, except to recognize that libraries offer more cost-effective access to current magazines and popular fiction. They do not perceive of these libraries as sources of information; they do not expect to have social interactions relating to literary interests or to be offered literary events such as author talks; and they have no expectation that a library might fulfill a reference function.

What patrons and library proprietors most seem to value is the rapid, convenient access to the most current magazines and popular fiction. This is precisely what the non-profit and registered libraries seem to do poorly, despite their large collections of older works, their literary functions and their reading halls.

Many questions have come to the surface as a result of this preliminary plowing of the field. These include the role of readers, library proprietors and distributors in selecting titles; the differences among readers of Marathi and of English fiction; and the place, if any, of commercial libraries among the poorer sections of Pune society. These remain to be explored in the subsequent phases of this project.

Acknowledgement

This research is supported by an American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) Senior Scholarly/Professional Development Fellowship with funds from the (U.S.) National Endowment for the Humanities. Gratitude is also due to the AIIS for sponsorship in their summer Marathi language program, to Eastern Michigan University for granting a semester-long Faculty Research Fellowship, and the Eastern Michigan University Library for granting a year's leave of absence.

Notes

- 1. The CD and tape lending businesses sometimes put the word "library" in their names, too, so that one notes signs for "Mayuresh Video Library," "Rhythm Record Library" and the like. It is clear that these non-books "libraries" are using the name metaphorically, however, because they are never called simply "library," but always use the qualifier VCD, video, record, etc. in their names; and also because no one actually describes them as libraries in conversation. The book-lending concerns, in contrast, are spoken of by most people in Pune indeed as libraries.
- 2. An additional comparative study of one library in a rural district town will not enter the discussion in this paper.
- 3. Historically, the city's name has also been rendered "Poona."
- 4. This refers only to Pune city proper, not the outlying areas belonging to Pune Zillah (district).
- 5. Resources included *Pune A to Z, Prakashan Jagat 2003, Prakashan Vishva 2004*, Garde 2000, the Pune

- Zillah list of registered libraries and the kind assistance of too many people to name.
- 6 The library in Pune that describes itself as the first woman-run library was originally a private collection of works related to Hindu religion, founded as a library in 1948 by a woman specialist in devotional hymns (kirtan). As this is a non-profit library, however, it was not included in this study.

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Editorial history: paper received 3 April 2004; final version received 8 May 2004; accepted 17 May 2004.