

**Bill No. XVI of 2026**

**THE CONSTITUTION (AMENDMENT) BILL, 2026**

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*further to amend the Constitution of India.*

BE it enacted by Parliament in the Seventy-seventh Year of the Republic of India as follows:—

1. (1) This Act may be called the Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2026.  
(2) It shall come into force immediately.

Short title and commencement.

- 5 2. **After article 21A of the Constitution, the following new article shall be inserted, namely:—**

Insertion of new article 21B.

**“21B. The State shall provide free access to knowledge and information through public libraries and public library services to all persons in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.”**

Right to free access to knowledge and information through public libraries.

## STATEMENT OF OBJECTS AND REASONS

The insatiable quest of Dr. Ambedkar for books during his New York days led him away from Manhattan down to 42<sup>nd</sup> street on Fifth Avenue in the city. During his stay in New York in the early 1900s, the imposing beaux-arts styled New York Public Library had recently opened its doors, and opened them to all – importantly, including to black people and to women. Historical record shows that Dr. Ambedkar was extremely impressed with the public library. Later, upon learning of the death of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta in Bombay, and the Bombay municipality's plan to prominently erect his statue, Dr. Ambedkar wrote for the Bombay Chronicle, the English-language weekly that Mehta had himself launched in 1910, that the city should build a Public Library and not a statue. Ambedkar is said to have argued in his letter that erecting a public library in Bombay instead of a 'trivial and unbecoming' statue would be more appropriate than wasting resources on statues:

“...It is unfortunate that we have not as yet realized the value of the library as an institution in the growth and advancement of a society. But this is not the place to dilate upon its virtues. That an enlightened public as that of Bombay should have suffered so long to be without an up-to-date public library is nothing short of disgrace and the earlier we make amends for it the better. There are some private libraries in Bombay operating independently by themselves. If these ill-managed concerns be mobilized into one building, built out of the Sir P.M. Mehta memorial fund and called after him, the city of Bombay shall have achieved both these purposes...”

Bombay Chronicle, Tuesday, 28<sup>th</sup> March, 1916.

History has shown us what happens when access to knowledge is controlled by a few. Such societies become pyramids of oppression—where those at the top read and rule, and those at the bottom are left to obey in darkness. Importantly, we learn that in such circumstances, even the tiny minority of elites eventually struggle to thrive. This Bill seeks to demolish that pyramid and replace it with a sphere of associated living: where all citizens may meet, think, learn, and grow as equals.

No person can be a full participant in political democracy unless they are also a participant in social and educational democracy. The ability to read, to think, and to inquire—these are not mere ornaments of the privileged; they are the instruments by which liberty, equality, and fraternity are made real for all. In the Constitution of India, the framers affirmed the Freedom of Speech and Expression under Article 19(1)(a). They affirmed the Right to Life and Dignity under Article 21. We have the Right to Education under Article 21A. But the exercise of these rights requires certain preconditions, and predominant among them is the availability of institutions where the people—all the people—may access knowledge, culture, and community. That institution is the public library.

It is a proven fact that public libraries serve not only as supportive third space for promoting economic growth, scientific innovation, and social mobility, they are essential elements of great civilizations. A nation cannot truly democratize opportunity without democratizing access to knowledge.

Around the world, public libraries are recognized as essential to democratic life. In many democracies worldwide, public libraries are legally guaranteed, digitally networked, and spatially integrated with other public services. Yet, in India, access to libraries—those most vital of civic institutions for building and sustaining robust democratic societies—remains severely inadequate, unequal, and unguaranteed, let alone developing a country wide interconnected system of public libraries.

Current data reveals:

- India spends a mere 7 paise per person per year on libraries.
- Many districts lack even one functional library.

- Despite our famous Digital Public Infrastructures, we have no official statistics on our public library ecosystem.

- Only 4 State Governments have managed to put in place the bare minimum financial arrangement to sustain libraries under their purview.

Today India has among the highest numbers of first-generation learners in the world. It also has vast disparities in access to quality reading material beyond school curricula, particularly in local languages. Although the digital age has opened up new frontiers, it has also exacerbated inequalities: for every smartphone user, there are many who lack digital literacy, stable connectivity, or the resources to participate in the knowledge economy. For those who can afford smartphones and internet, without supportive reading communities of trained librarians and peers, they are as unlikely to take advantage of learning opportunities as those without.

In any country calling itself a democracy, the means of mental uplift must be placed at the disposal of all. Education does not end with the school-leaving certificate, diploma, or a college degree. Nor is learning the sole business of the elite. In the villages of India, in the *bastis* and *chawls* of the cities, there are Indians with minds as sharp and souls as hungry for knowledge as any who sit in Parliament or the few of our fellow citizens who have inherited financial and social capital to afford personal libraries. Continued under-investment in public libraries is not only depriving the underprivileged, it will also permanently relegate India to being a backward region.

As the planet hurtles through the polycrises of climate change, transformations in the global order of power among nations, and financial and trade relations, and the promises and perils of Artificial Intelligence, India as a country is poised to reclaim its lost glory. But this glory will not be served to us on a silver platter. We must mobilize the country's demographic dividend to usher in a long period of abundance. Public Libraries are absolutely central towards meeting this objective. India is already 75 years late, we cannot afford to waste any more time.

It thus follows, that in a democracy premised on justice, equality, and liberty, the right to read is not a luxury—it is a foundational necessity. The right to public libraries must therefore be secured as a fundamental right, and their access must therefore necessarily be free, as they are as basic to survival and human life and dignity as food, water, air, clothing and shelter.

Let it be said that in the 77<sup>th</sup> year of our independence, we remembered what the Constitution demanded: not merely freedom in theory, but equality in practice. By declaring access to public libraries as a fundamental right, this Parliament would be taking a historic step to ensure that the Republic of India is also a republic of readers.

Hence, this Bill.

V. SIVADASAN.

## FINANCIAL MEMORANDUM

Clause 2 of the Bill *inter alia* provides for free access to knowledge and information to all persons through public libraries and public library services. This Bill, therefore, would involve expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of India. However, it is not possible to assess the actual financial expenditure likely to be incurred at this stage.



RAJYA SABHA

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*(Dr. V. Sivadasan, M.P.)*