

AS INTRODUCED IN THE RAJYA SABHA
ON THE 5TH DECEMBER, 2025

Bill No. XLI of 2025

THE RIGHT TO READ BILL, 2025

A

BILL

to guarantee free access to libraries within the country to all citizens in a non-discriminatory manner and develop and maintain a comprehensive public library system within the country to cater to the general and specialised needs of the members of the community and for matters connected therewith and incidental thereto.

WHEREAS, it is necessary to guarantee equitable access to reading infrastructure for all citizens, above and beyond educational facilities, to empower all citizens by providing life-long learning resources to support creativity, innovation, research and development, allowing them to satisfy intellectual curiosities for self-improvement and social progress to drive the sustenance of Indian democracy;

AND WHEREAS, a public library, in particular, a physical public library space that is freely accessible to all citizens, as the living force for education, culture and information, is an indispensable institution to achieve the above-mentioned multi-faceted and interconnected objectives;

AND WHEREAS, large sections of the citizens in the country, oppressed historically by caste as well as by other intersecting inequalities, have been excluded from resources and opportunities for reading, education, life-long self-improvement and self-expression as also opportunities to be connected in a community cutting across identities, and establishment of a public library institution can play a crucial role in challenging such historic exclusion and inhumane division of society as well as promote research, innovation, and economic progress;

AND WHEREAS, several States have varying public library systems without any common definition of a public library or interconnection between such public libraries, it is desirable to provide a common minimum framework for establishment and operation of an extensive and expansive public library system across the country that is responsive to the evolving needs of the public, while ensuring a degree of autonomy to the States in establishing their own public library institutions;

AND WHEREAS, the current support provided by the Union as well as the State Governments for existing libraries in the country and respective States, needs to be augmented to support the aspirations of the public, especially in providing financial support, permanent library staff, dynamically tracking changes in reading habits and pertinent transformations in the culture of the society in the wake of technological changes, maintaining and publishing official statistics on libraries, and enabling an equitable and freely accessible system of exchange of library services with libraries, both within and outside India.

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

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY

Short title and commencement.

1. (1) This Act may be called the Right to Read Act, 2025. 5

(2) It shall come into force on such date as the Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, appoint.

Definitions.

2. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,—

(a) “aided library” means libraries receiving grant-in-aid from the appropriate Government/ local authority according to prescribed rules and includes libraries receiving aid in the form of subsidised access to resources including land, books, other library services of institutions which are established or maintained or run directly or indirectly, or funded wholly or partially by the appropriate Government or by any local authority. 10

(b) “appropriate Government” means in case of a State, the Government of that State and in all other cases, the Union Government; 15

(c) “citizen” means any person living within the territory of India with Indian citizenship according to the laws in this regard for the time being in force;

(d) “District Authority” means the authority of a revenue District; 20

(e) “extension service” means activities pertaining to preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and includes activities which seek to encourage the intellectual, literary, historic, scientific and social scientific character of the community;

(f) “government public library” means all public libraries that are funded wholly, whether directly or indirectly, and/or entirely controlled by the local authority or the appropriate Government or any one of its authorities or institutions; 25

(g) “library” means any centre within the territory of India, whether virtual or physical, which maintains a collection of books or permits deposit of books, and provides library service or extension service, and includes a mobile library/ library-on-wheels;

5 (h) “Library Fund” means the State Public Library Fund constituted under section 16;

(i) “library service” means and includes providing reading facilities and lending out books to the users and/ or assisting the users to procure a book including providing relevant information to them to enable them to know, locate and consult books and other materials and to secure from such books and materials information relevant to their purpose;

10 (j) “local authority” means a Municipal Corporation or Municipal Council or Zila Parishad or Nagar Panchayat or Gram Panchayat, by whatever name called and includes such other authority or body having administrative control or empowered by, or under any law for the time being in force, to function as a local authority in any city, town or village;

15 (k) “outlier library” means any library that is not a part of the public library system;

(l) “public library” means any library established or maintained or run directly or indirectly, or funded wholly or partially by the appropriate Government or by any local authority, and includes

(i) an aided library; and/or

(ii) any library that is notified by the appropriate Government as per rules prescribed, as a public library.

25 (m) “prescribed” means prescribed by rules made under this Act.

(n) “public library system” means an organic interlinking of all libraries in the country into a network to facilitate library and/ or extension services in a systematic and organised manner; and

30 *Explanation.-* All public libraries within the State shall automatically be considered part of the public library system.

CHAPTER II

RIGHT OF FREE ACCESS TO PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND LIBRARY SERVICES

3. Notwithstanding anything contrary contained in any other law for the time being in force –

Right to free and inclusive libraries.

35 (1) Every citizen shall have the right of free access to a public library and its services in a non-discriminatory manner.

Explanation 1.- No public library shall charge from any citizen, any kind of fee or charges or expenses in any form such as registration fee, membership fees, security deposit or maintenance fees, or otherwise in lieu of such right of access.

40 *Explanation 2.-* No public library shall practice any kind of segregation in giving access to its library services on the grounds of caste, gender, class and/or income group, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, age, race or any other identity, meaning thereby that every citizen shall have the right to access the library and its library services and/ or extension services in a non-discriminatory and integrated manner:

Provided that, nothing stated in *Explanation 2* shall preclude a public library from holding special library services / programs for:

- (a) women and/ or children for their educational, social or personal development;
- (b) serving the cultural and educational needs of minorities to conserve their language, script, or culture; or
- (c) serving the cultural and educational needs of socially and/or economically disadvantaged communities.

(2) Every citizen shall have the right to be a member of any public library situated anywhere within the territory of India. 10

(3) Every citizen shall have the right to a public library within reasonable distance from their place of ordinary residence.

Membership
criteria not to be
onerous.

4. No citizen shall be required to provide any documentation in order to become a member of or enjoy free access to a public library and its services, other than documentation that allows the public library to reasonably identify and contact the user: 15

Provided that, no citizen shall be denied access to a public library and its services which are provided within the physical premises of such library, only on the ground that such documentation has not been furnished.

CHAPTER III 20

POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STATE GOVERNMENTS

State
enforcement
mechanism.

5. Every State Government, and where the context otherwise requires, the local authority, shall –

(1) formulate a State Public Library Policy for application to its own State, which shall provide for all aspects necessary to support the establishment of public library institutions within the State, and shall include, but may not be limited to the following – 25

(a) establishment of library institutions to contribute to the personal development and improvement of social opportunities of the citizens, which shall include, but may not be limited to the following – 30

- (i) making knowledge and information available;
- (ii) providing opportunities for development and education;
- (iii) promoting reading and introducing first-generation or first-time readers to literature; 35
- (iv) organizing meetings and debates; and
- (v) providing opportunities for exploration, preservation and promotion of art and culture; 40

(b) establishment of a networked public library system such that the resources and services of each public library within the State may be accessible to all citizens from any public library within the State and maintain a regularly updated database of all libraries including outlier libraries within the State and separately for those which are part of the public library system, along with the resources and facilities available therein, in such manner as may be prescribed; 45

5 (c) establishment of a tiered system of libraries including a State Public Library, along with its regional branches, if any, District Public Library and village/ panchayat level public library, with their own powers, functions and responsibilities for maintaining public library institutions in such manner as may be prescribed;

(d) prescribing standards of library facilities and services of public libraries, depending on the type of library and the needs of the community that the public library serves; and

10 *Explanation* - Needs of communities shall include needs of local communities affected by factors such as but not limited to diversity of terrain, extent of accessible road networks and availability of public transport, culture, density of population, and evolving climatic conditions.

15 (e) developing programs for teaching and training of personnel in library and information science towards building library professionals and researchers in order to meet the needs of public library institutions of the State;

20 (2) constitute, by notification in the Official Gazette, a State Library Directorate, which shall be a department of the State Government with adequate staff with such salary and allowances and other terms and conditions of service similar to those of other State Government Departments and to be recruited in such manner as may be prescribed;

25 (3) constitute, by notification in the Official Gazette, a State advisory body, by whatever name called, on matters concerning the management and development of public library system including public library institutions and library and/or extensions services in the State, formulation of policies, including training policies, and programmes in relation to such system and such other matters relating thereto, in such manner as may be prescribed;

30 Provided that the membership of such a State advisory body shall necessarily include persons having life experience in respect of writing or publishing or promoting literature, science, art and/ or social sciences or having special knowledge of these subjects, eminent scholars, library science experts, representatives of libraries of eminent institutions, representatives from other public libraries, organic intellectuals, eminent journalists, reader members of such public libraries and such other persons, as may be prescribed;

40 Provided further that, eminence in scholarship or expertise in any of the above matters or subjects shall be determined in a holistic manner and shall not be determined solely by formal modes of recognition and similar signifiers of social capital;

45 (4) ensure that all government public libraries are staffed with adequately qualified and trained full-time public library employees and lay down the qualifications, the manner of recruitment and other terms and conditions of service for such employees, including rules of reservation for socially and economically disadvantaged sections of the society, which shall be similar to those of the employees of other Government Departments;

50 (5) prepare and publish, in such form and manner as may be prescribed, the following reports and/ or plans –

(a) annual, short-term and/or long-term plans for the development of libraries within the State;

(b) a regularly updated database of all libraries, including outlier libraries, within the State, and separately for those which are part of the public library system, along with the resources and facilities available therein;

(c) descriptive and statistical reports on the working of all public libraries within the State; and 5

(6) ensure that all government public libraries are equipped with adequate facilities and provisions for reading materials, entertainment, and audio-visual materials, in physical and digital form, computers and network access with requisite cyber security infrastructure, and adequate seating for free use of their members including special provisions for persons with disabilities. 10

Autonomy of
State
Governments.

6. Except where stated otherwise in any other provision in this Act, every State Government shall have complete autonomy in developing its own public library policy and establishing, managing and supervising its own public library institutions. 15

CHAPTER IV

POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Constitution of a
National level
Advisory Body
to promote a
comprehensive
public library
institution in the
country.

7. (1) **The Central Government shall, by notification in the Official Gazette, establish a national-level advisory body, by whatever name called, for the purposes of promoting a comprehensive public library institution in the country, advising various Departments and Ministries and ensuring necessary coordination amongst them for strengthening the establishment of a comprehensive public library institution, including for the purposes of assessing and addressing the general and special learning needs of the community, enabling access to libraries situated outside the territory of India, and facilitating a networked system of public libraries across all States, in such manner as may be prescribed.** 20 25

- (2) **The membership of the national-level advisory body shall comprise:** 30

(a) **one representative each to be nominated by each State from amongst persons having life experience in library activism or library profession, library science experts, representatives of libraries of eminent institutions, and representatives from other public libraries and such other persons, in such manner as may be prescribed;** 35

(b) **five persons to be nominated by the Central Government, from the fields of art, literature, library activism, library science research and social work, in such manner as may be prescribed:**

Provided that the Chairperson of the body shall be elected by the members annually and every member shall have the right to be elected as the Chairperson; 40

Provided further that experience in the profession or expertise in any of the above subjects shall be determined in a holistic manner and shall not be determined solely by formal modes of recognition and similar signifiers of social capital. 45

- (3) **The term of office, the salary and allowances payable to and other terms and conditions of service of the Chairperson and Members of the national-level advisory body shall be such as may be prescribed.**

Integrated
Public Library
System.

8. (1) **The Central Government shall establish a mechanism to enable libraries situated within the territory of India to have access to libraries and services of libraries situated outside the territory of India, whether on the basis of reciprocity or any international exchange agreements or otherwise.** 50

	(2) The Central Government shall facilitate interlinking of public library systems across and within the States including providing necessary technical infrastructure, logistical support and financial assistance.	
5	9. (1) The Central Government shall maintain database of all public libraries in the country and ensure that the database is updated on an annual basis and is freely accessible to the citizens.	Maintenance of library database.
10	(2) The database maintained under sub-section (1) shall include information regarding the resources available in such libraries, and the library services provided therein.	
15	10. (1) The Central Government shall prepare and publish an Annual Report on the implementation of the Act, working of public libraries included in the database under section 9 and working of the public libraries established across the States, including therein the audited accounts of State Public Library Funds under section 17, in such form and manner as may be prescribed.	Annual Report.
	(2) A copy of the Annual Report under sub-section (1) shall be laid before each House of Parliament.	
	CHAPTER V	
20	POWERS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENT	
	11. For implementing the provisions of this Act, the appropriate Government shall—	Notification of libraries as public libraries.
25	(i) notify any library within its territorial jurisdiction, whether established or maintained or run directly or indirectly or funded wholly or partially by the appropriate library or an aided library or any other library, as deemed fit, as a public library; and	
30	(ii) where the number of public libraries in any area or limits of neighborhood under its territorial jurisdiction is found insufficient to meet the needs of the community, establish, by notification in the Official Gazette, within such area or limits of neighborhood under its territorial jurisdiction, such number of free and inclusive public libraries, as per a time-bound action plan in such manner as may be prescribed:	
35	Provided that any outlier library that is open to the public and ensures free access to its library and extensions services to such public, may apply to the appropriate Government to be notified as a public library, in such form and manner as may be prescribed;	
40	Provided further that the appropriate Government, may out of its own accord or on receipt of such application and after following such due procedure as may be prescribed, notify an outlier library as a public library.	
45	12. (1) A public library notified under section 11 may be required to adhere to such conditions as may be prescribed;	Autonomy of notified public libraries to remain intact.
	Provided that, any condition prescribed under this sub-section shall be limited to enable the appropriate Government to ensure that such notified public library:-	
50	(a) allows free access to the citizens to itself and its services;	
	(b) is enabled to be integrated into the public library system; and	
	(c) is not in violation of any provisions of this law or any other law in force:	

Provided further that, any condition prescribed under this sub-section shall not have the effect of requiring such notified public library to give up autonomy in ownership and decision-making of the running of the library, including constitution of management and appointment of staff, nature of library and/or extension services, book collection, mode of acquisition, curriculum, etc. 5

(2) A public library notified under section 11 shall be entitled to receive funds in such manner and for such purposes as may be prescribed;

Provided that the receiving of funds shall not be subject to the condition that the public library shall have to give up autonomy in ownership and decision-making of the running of the library, including constitution of management and appointment of staff, nature of library and/or extension services, book collection, mode of acquisition, curriculum, etc. 10

(3) Nothing in this section shall preclude a notified public library from receiving gifts, donations or funds from any other source, including individuals, charities, or Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, to further enhance their library and/or extension services. 15

Incubation of public libraries.

13. (1) The appropriate Government shall facilitate development of libraries into free and inclusive public libraries through an enabling system of training programmes, guidance notes on establishing libraries, access to other public libraries within the public library system, access to eminent library specialists, creating linkages with universities or colleges offering library and/or information science courses, financial assistance and such other programmes, as may be prescribed, as part of such an enabling system. 20 25

(2) It shall be open to any library to apply to the appropriate Government for access to such an enabling system as mentioned in sub-section (1), in such form and manner as may be prescribed.

Safeguard against discrimination.

14. Subject to the provisions of this Act, the appropriate Government shall ensure that no public library shall practice any form of discrimination and/or segregation on the grounds of caste, gender, class and/or income group, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, age, race or any other identity, in provision of its services. 30

CHAPTER VI

FINANCING AND AUDITING OF ACCOUNTS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES 35

Sharing of financial responsibilities.

15. (1) The Central Government and the State Governments shall have concurrent responsibility for providing funds for implementing the provisions of this Act.

(2) The Central Government shall prepare the estimates of capital and recurring expenditure for the implementation of the provisions of the Act. 40

(3) The Central Government shall provide to the State Governments, as grants-in-aid of revenues, such percentage of expenditure referred to in sub-section (2) as it may determine, from time to time, in consultation with the State Governments. 45

(4) The State Governments shall, after taking into consideration, the sums provided by the Central Government and its other resources, be responsible to provide funds for implementation of the provisions of this Act.

State Public Library Fund.

16. (1) Every State Government shall constitute a fund, to be called the State Public Library Fund, for establishment of public libraries at the State, District and Village level. 50

(2) There shall be credited into the Library Fund:-

(a) amounts provided by the State Government, District Authority, and/or local authority for development, improvement and maintenance of public library institutions in the State;

5 (b) funds received from the Central Government;

(c) any special grant, which the Central or a State Government may make for any specific purposes;

10 (d) any amounts diverted from other funds available with the Central or State Government or District Authorities and/or local authority, especially where such funds are earmarked for purposes intrinsically connected to public libraries including education, promotion of science, arts, language, culture, technology, infrastructure and setting up of innovation labs and/or incubation of start-ups;

15 (e) any amount received as gift, contribution or endowment for the development of public libraries in the State including from public sector enterprises, private sector, philanthropist organisations, foundations or international bodies;

20 (f) any loans that the State Government, District Authority or local authority may raise;

(g) any income from investment of the amounts received by the Library Fund; and

(h) such other sources as may be prescribed.

25 (3) Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force, the unutilised sums of money, if any, in the Library Fund shall not be diverted for any purposes other than the purposes of achieving the objectives of this Act.

30 (4) The State Government and or/ local authority, as the case may be, shall make appropriate arrangements to ensure investment of unutilised amounts in the Library Fund to further enhance the functioning of public libraries.

17. (1) The accounts of the Library Fund shall be maintained in the prescribed form and manner.

Accounts and
Audit of
Accounts of the
Library Fund.

35 (2) The accounts of the Library Fund shall be audited annually by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or by any such officer or authority as may be appointed by him in this behalf and a copy of the audit report, as certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or any other person appointed by him, shall be submitted to the State Government in the prescribed manner, who shall cause it to be laid before each House of the State Legislature or the Union territory Legislature, where it consists of two Houses, or where such legislature consists of one House, before that House.

40 (3) The sanction, allocation and utilization, whether by the Central or State Government or local authority, of all funds, grants, or any other financial arrangements meant for the purposes of establishing public library institutions, shall be made available to the public in real-time in an accessible format, by the appropriate Government and/or local authority, in such manner as may be prescribed.

CHAPTER VII

POWER TO MAKE RULES

50 **18.** (1) Subject to the other provisions of this Act, the appropriate Government may, by notification, make rules for carrying out the provisions of this Act.

Power of
appropriate
Government to
make rules.

(2) In particular and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing power, such rules may be made to provide for all or any of the following matters, namely:—

(a) the eligibility, procedure for application and conditions for grant-in-aid to aided libraries; 5

(b) the manner of establishment of a tiered system of libraries along with their constitution, functions and powers under clause (c) of sub-section (1) of section 5;

(c) the manner of constitution of the State Library Directorate, the posts and job descriptions therein, the specific functions of the Directorate and its offices, the strength, qualification, training, manner of appointment, and terms and conditions of service of its staff, including conditions of absorption of existing staff under sub-section (2) of section 5; 10

(d) the manner of constitution of the State advisory body, membership and designation of members thereof, their term of office, procedure for filling in vacancies, its functions, holding of meetings and the procedure to be observed therein under sub-section (3) of section 5; 15

(e) the manner of establishment of and nomination of the Chairperson and members of the national-level advisory body, their term of office, the salary and allowances payable to them and their other terms and conditions of service, procedure for filling in vacancies, its functions, holding of meetings and the procedure to be observed therein under section 7; 20

(f) the manner of establishment of public libraries in any area or limits of neighborhood and the form and manner of application as well as the procedure for notification of an outlier library as a public library under section 11; 25

(g) the conditions and the manner of grant of funds and the purposes for which such grant is made to a library notified as a public library under section 12; 30

(h) the form and manner of incubation of public libraries under section 13;

(i) the sources from which funds may be credited into the Library Fund under section 16; 35

(j) the form and manner of maintenance and audit of the accounts of the Library Fund and submission of audit report to the State Government as well as the manner of making available to the general public information pertaining to the sanction, allocation and utilization by the State Government or local authority, of all funds, grants, or any other financial arrangements meant for the purposes of establishing public library institutions under Section 17; 40

(k) the procedure for establishment of a networked public library system, including the coordination or centralisation of technical work in the public library system of the State and manner of maintenance of database of all libraries in the State under clause (b) of sub-section (1) of section 5, 45

(l) the form and manner of preparation and publication of annual reports and/or plans on the development and functioning of public libraries under sub-section (5) of section 5; and 50

(m) any other matter which is to be or may be prescribed under this Act, or is deemed necessary by the appropriate Government to discharge its functions under and implement the provisions of this Act.

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>5</p> <p>10</p> <p>15</p> <p>20</p> | <p>19. Every rule made by the Central Government under this Act shall be laid, as soon as may be after it is made, before each House of the Parliament, while it is in session, for a total period of thirty days which may be comprised in one session or in two or more successive sessions, and if, before the expiry of the session in which it is so laid or the successive session aforesaid, the House agrees in making any modification in the rules or the House agrees the rules should not be made, they shall thereafter have effect only in such modified form or be no effect, as the case may be, so however, that any such modification or amendment shall be without prejudice to the validity of anything previously done under this rules.</p> <p>20. Every rule made by the State Government under this Act shall be laid, as soon as may be after it is made, before each House of the State Legislature where it consists of two Houses, or where such Legislature consists of one House, before that House.</p> <p>21. (1) If any difficulty arises in giving effect to the provisions of this Act, the Central Government may, by order published in the Official Gazette, make such provisions, not inconsistent with the provisions of this Act, as appear to it to be necessary or expedient for removing the difficulty:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Provided that no order shall be made under this section after the expiry of two years from the commencement of this Act.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">(2) Every order made under this section shall be laid, as soon as may be after it is made, before each House of Parliament.</p> <p>22. The provisions of this Act shall be in addition to and not in derogation of any other law for the time being in force.</p> | <p>Rules made by Central Government to be laid before Parliament.</p>
<p>Rules made by State Government to be laid before the State Legislature.</p> <p>Power to remove difficulties.</p>
<p>Act to supplement other laws.</p> |
|--|---|--|

STATEMENT OF OBJECTS AND REASONS

Historians tell us that his insatiable quest for books led Dr. Ambedkar during his New York days, away from Manhattan down to 42nd 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, 28th March, 1916.

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 Infrastructure, we have no official statistics on our public library ecosystem.
- Only 4 State Governments have managed to put in place a sustainable financial arrangement for libraries under their purview.

In addition to this historical neglect, 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. If they are deprived of access to libraries, then they are deprived not only of books—but of opportunity, self-respect, and citizenship itself.

History has shown us what happens when access to knowledge is controlled by the 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.

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 civic 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 76th 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 legal right, this Parliament would be taking a historic step to ensure that the Republic of India is also a republic of readers.

The objectives of the Bill are fivefold:

- To give legislative form to a fundamental proposition - that the right to read is intrinsic to the right to be a citizen.
- To give legislative framework to develop a well-funded, decentralised, and inclusive public library network that is professionally staffed, and culturally inclusive and serves as a crucial leveller to fill the gap of public learning environments, community resource centres, quiet civic spaces, and cultural anchors which can nurture, strengthen, and sustain Indian democracy and economy.
- To provide legislative backing to State Government led networks of autonomously run public libraries through which all persons, regardless of their background, have assured access to inclusive, community-based, and resource-rich public libraries, supported through a just and accountable public finance system.

- To mandate the establishment of a national framework for public library infrastructure, with minimum standards to be met by each state and district, including libraries in local languages and formats accessible to persons with disabilities.
- To mandate provision of finances in annual budgets, grants by the Central Government to State Governments and establishment of specific funds to support the development and maintenance of public libraries, particularly in historically underserved and marginalised regions.
- To institutionalise the training and employment of library workers, especially from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Minority communities, so that the management of knowledge becomes a task of the people themselves.

Hence, this Bill.

V. SIVADASAN.

FINANCIAL MEMORANDUM

Clause 3 of the Bill provides that every citizen shall have right of free access to a public library and its services in a non-discriminatory manner and that no citizen shall be liable to pay any kind of fees or charges or expenses *in lieu of* such right of access.

Clause 7 of the Bill provides for the establishment of a national-level advisory body for promoting a comprehensive public library institution in the country and such other functions as specified and for the membership thereof as well as the salary and allowances payable to and other terms and conditions of service of the Chairperson and Members of the advisory body. Clause 8 provides that the Central Government shall establish a mechanism to enable libraries situated within the territory of India to have access to libraries and services of libraries situated outside the territory of India and to facilitate interlinking of public library systems across and within the States including providing necessary technical infrastructure, logistical support and financial assistance. Clause 9 provides that the Central Government shall maintain a database of all public libraries in the country. Clause 11 provides that the appropriate Government and local authority shall establish such number of free and inclusive public libraries within such area or limits of neighbourhood under its territorial jurisdiction in accordance with a time-bound action plan, where the number of such libraries is found insufficient. Clause 13 provides that the appropriate Government shall facilitate development of libraries into free and inclusive public libraries through an enabling system of training programmes, guidance notes, access to other public libraries within the public library system, access to eminent library specialists, creating linkages with universities or colleges offering library and/or information science courses, financial assistance and such other programmes. Clause 15 provides that the Central Government and the State Government shall make available funds for implementing the provisions of the Bill and that the Central Government shall prepare the estimates of capital and recurring expenditure and provide to the State Governments, as grants-in-aid of revenues, such percentage of expenditure as it may determine from time to time, in consultation with State Governments.

The Bill, therefore, if enacted, will involve expenditure, both of recurring and non-recurring nature, from the Consolidated Fund of India. It is, however, not possible at this stage to estimate the exact quantum of expenditure likely to be involved at this stage.

MEMORANDUM REGARDING DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Clause 18 of the Bill *inter alia* empowers the Central Government to make rules for carrying out the purposes of the Bill. Clause 21 of the Bill provides that the Central Government may, make such provisions, by order, as may be necessary for removing any difficulty to give effect to the provisions of this Bill.

As the matters in respect of which rules may be made are matters of procedure and administrative detail only, the delegation of legislative power is, therefore, of a normal character.

RAJYA SABHA

A

BILL

to guarantee free access to libraries within the country to all citizens in a
non-discriminatory manner and develop and maintain a comprehensive
public library system within the country to cater to the general
and specialised needs of the members of the community
and for matters connected therewith and
incidental thereto.

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