



# Restoring dignity

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## **The time has come to end the stigma and discrimination against the leprosy-affected**

- It has long been a blot on Indian society that while leprosy is completely curable, there lingers a social stigma attached to it.
- These were unconscionably discriminatory from the beginning, but even in independent India, where the law has been an instrument for social change, the process of removing them has been bafflingly slow.
- The Lepers Act of 1898 was repealed only two years ago.
- Two recent developments hold out hope to end the entrenched discrimination in law and society against those afflicted by it.
- One was the introduction of a Bill in Parliament to remove leprosy as a ground for seeking divorce or legal separation from one's spouse, and the other was the Supreme Court asking the Centre whether it would bring in a positive law conferring rights and benefits on persons with leprosy and deeming as repealed all Acts and rules that perpetuated the stigma associated with it.
- The Personal Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2018, is only a small step.
- An affirmative action law that recognises the rights of those affected and promotes their social inclusion will serve a larger purpose.
- It may mark the beginning of the end to the culture of ostracisation that most of them face and help remove misconceptions about the disease and dispel the belief that physical segregation of patients is necessary.
- Since last year, the Supreme Court has been hearing a writ petition by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy seeking to uphold the fundamental rights of people with leprosy and the repeal of discriminatory laws against them.
- The court has been approaching the issue with sensitivity and is seeking to find legal means to ensure a life of dignity for them.
- The 256th Report of the Law Commission came up with a number of suggestions, including the repeal of discriminatory legal provisions also listing abolition of personal laws and Acts on beggary.
- The report cited the UN General Assembly resolution of 2010 on the elimination of discrimination against persons with leprosy.
- The resolution sought the abolition of laws, rules, regulations, customs and practices that amounted to discrimination, and wanted countries to promote the understanding that leprosy is not easily communicable and is curable.
- The campaign to end discrimination against those afflicted, and combating the stigma associated with it, is decades old.
- While governments may have to handle the legislative part, society has an even larger role to play.
- It is possible to end discrimination by law, but stigma tends to survive reform and may require more than legal efforts to eliminate.

**Additional Info:**

- The global leprosy situation has changed significantly over the last four decades after the introduction of multidrug therapy (MDT) in 1982 with a reduction in prevalence from over 5 million cases in the mid-1980s to less than 200,000 at the end of 2016.
- The programme in India also saw a reduction from a prevalence rate of 57.8/10,000 in 1983 to less than 1/10,000 by the end of 2005 when India declared to have reached the World Health Organization (WHO) target of elimination as a public health problem.
- Post 2005, major changes in the programme were made by the National leprosy eradication programme (NLEP) and the global leprosy programme, which may have affected the new case detection (NCD), disability, and child leprosy trends, which continue to show no appreciable regression.

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