

Exclusion faced by Leprosy patients

What is the issue?

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For centuries the leprosy-affected people in India have been socially and legally excluded, now they are facing a digital isolation.

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What is leprosy?

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 - Leprosy is caused by infection with the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*.
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 - It is a chronic, curable infectious disease it affects the skin, the peripheral nerves, mucosal surfaces of the upper respiratory tract, and eyes.
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 - Symptoms include light-coloured or red skin patches with reduced sensation, numbness and weakness in hands and feet.
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 - The disease is now readily treatable with multi-drug therapy within 6-12 months, which combines three drugs to kill the pathogen and cure the victim.
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 - Disability and disfigurement can be avoided if the disease is treated early.
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 - India officially became leprosy free in the year 2005, amidst of this fact there are majority of cases are being reported from India.

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What are the problems faced by leprosy patients in India?

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 - Stigma against the disease due to its disfigurement causes its victims to be isolated and shunned.

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- Most of the patients cannot receive government pension and rations, since the patients don't have a permanent address.
 - As many patients don't have thumbs or fingers for the fingerprint scanner to read, they are denied from the benefits claimed using smart cards.
 - Unfortunately, even the iris scanners do not work for them.
 - If the person who normally gets the ration is indisposed or out of station, the family has to forgo supplies that month.
 - To the social isolation the patients are choosing begging as a livelihood option.
 - There are reported rackets of trafficking of these patients for organ transplantation.
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What are the discriminating acts of Indian government?

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- Laws in the states of Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa prohibit leprosy patients from running in local elections.
 - These laws have been supported by the national government, as evidenced when India's Supreme Court upheld a ruling by the state of Orissa prohibiting leprosy patients from participating in local elections.
 - Motor Vehicle Act of 1939 which restricts leprosy patients from obtaining a driving license.
 - The Indian Rail Act of 1990 prohibits leprosy patients from traveling by train.
 - Almost all of the marriage and divorce laws of India consider leprosy as grounds for divorce with the Special Marriage Act of 1954 declaring leprosy "incurable."
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Way forward

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- Many of the laws of Indian government were passed before the development of multi-drug therapy (MDT) and they have not been updated since.

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- These laws do not reflect the current understanding of leprosy, and it leads to the fear of leprosy being worse than the disease itself.

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- Nodal agencies must work out a solution to address the distress being faced by the leprosy affected people.

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- The Civil Supplies, Municipal Administration and other departments must address the exempt those affected from fingerprint scans.

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Source: The Hindu

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