

## 21st century India cannot shun leprosy patients: SC

Twenty-first century society cannot justify shunning persons affected by leprosy or keeping them hidden in homes and away from the mainstream, the Supreme Court declared in an order on Monday.

The court asked the Centre to respond in eight weeks to a call to repeal 119 Central and State laws in practice since the 1950s that discriminate against leprosy patients despite the fact that modern medicine completely cures the disease.

### Denying the truth

A bench led by Chief Justice Dipak Misra, acting on a PIL filed by Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, found that these statutory laws continue to recognise superstitions that leprosy is “infectious and has something to do with genetics”.

The court has asked the government to explain the continued existence of these laws, which, in a way, deny the truth that modern medicine cures leprosy. The petition has urged the court to intervene and pave the way for recognising the fundamental right to equality, dignity and equal opportunity of persons affected by leprosy.

“There are 119 laws that discriminate against persons affected by leprosy in broadly the following five ways: (i) cause stigmatization and indignity to persons affected by leprosy, (ii) isolate/segregate persons affected by leprosy, (iii) deny them access to public services, (iv) impose disqualifications on them under personal laws, or (v) bar them from occupying or standing for public posts or office,” Vidhi, represented by senior advocate Raju Ramachandran, said.

These laws rob persons affected by leprosy by denying them equal treatment under personal laws, in matters of employment and appointment or election to public office, as well as access to and free movement in public places, it said.

“This unequal treatment irrationally treats persons affected by leprosy as a separate class... the impugned provisions stigmatise and isolate persons affected by leprosy, even though with the latest medical advancements, leprosy is rendered non-infectious after the very first dose of Multi-Drug Therapy,” the petition said.

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