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It's only skin deep

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THE HINDU A human chain to create awareness on leucoderma and dispel misconceptions about it, was held at Tambaram on Wednesday. File photo : A_Muralitharan.

Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister, listed tuberculosis, cancer and leucoderma as the three major mental and public health challenges that free India faced. He had a reason to bracket leucoderma with TB and cancer: while TB and cancer consume the lives of several thousands of people, leucoderma has a serious impact on the psyche of the affected people.

Although leucoderma is not fatal, those affected suffer a fate worse than death as the stigma attached to it is deep-rooted in the minds of people. The stigma is the result of sheer ignorance. The scientific facts are: Leucoderma is not a disease. Nor is it contagious. It is not hereditary at all. It is purely a skin condition that can affect anybody.

The stigma comes into play in a big way at the time of marriage. Young men and women suffering from leucoderma are generally rejected in the marriage market. Worse, even children whose parents (either or both) or whose family members suffer from leucoderma are also rejected on the grounds that it is hereditary.

It is a global phenomenon as two per cent of the world's population, cutting across barriers of geography, ethnicity, race, caste and class are affected. In India, four per cent (approximately six crore people) are affected with leucoderma.

The Leucoderma Awareness Movement - India, formed in 1996, has been striving hard to eradicate the social stigma attached to this skin condition. It has been reaching out to all sections of society by conducting awareness lectures in schools and colleges. It also offers counselling to the affected to cope with the skin condition and medical advice to make the white spots disappear.

The movement conducts programmes like human chains involving the affected and student volunteers. More than one lakh copies of a documentary film on creating awareness have been distributed free of cost.

But there has been no commitment on the part of the Central or State governments to address the huge challenges posed by leucoderma. If the Prime Minister and the Chief Ministers were to make a simple announcement that leucoderma is not a disease and trigger efforts to combat the mental block in people, it would go a long way in mitigating the sufferings of crores of people, lighting up their lives, and fostering family harmony and peace for the affected.

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