

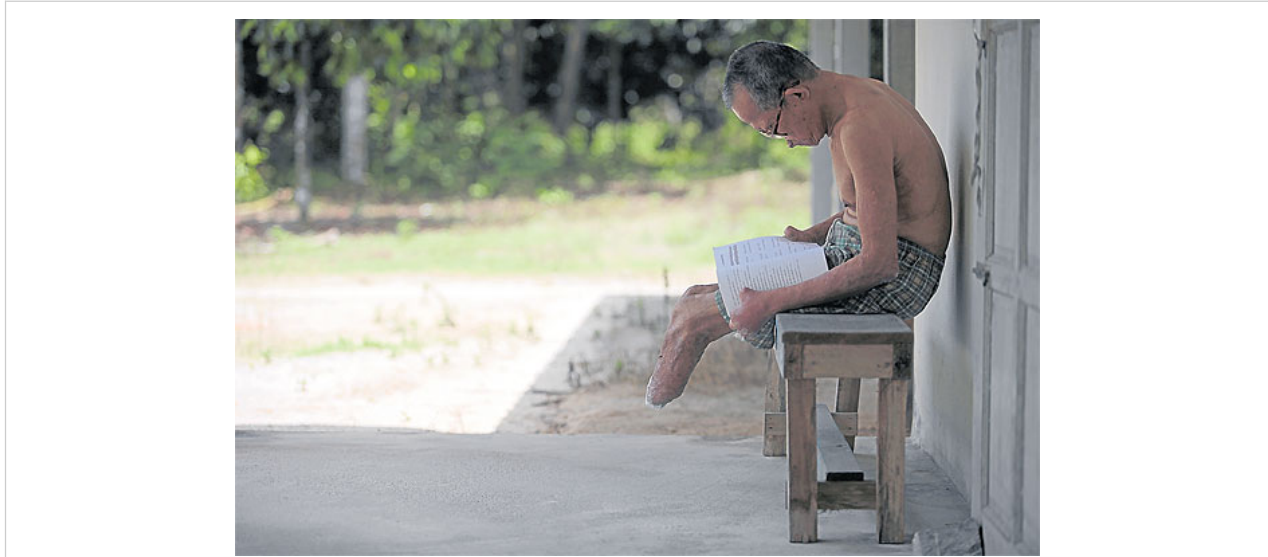
An exile asylum

Phud Hong Leper Colony is a community where more than 160 lepers live without social discrimination

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When Muay Saetang found out she had leprosy, she thought the only way out was through death.



"I wished to die," recalled Muay, speaking of the moment she learned she had leprosy when she was 22 years old. "Life came to a dead end. All I wanted to do was to commit suicide. I thought it was the only way to put an end to this problem."

Her close friends tried to talk her out of her suicidal attempt, telling her that if she died with leprosy, she would be born with the disease again in the next life. Instead, she should live as a way to repent her bad karma.

She chose to live. A native of Bangkok, Muay relocated to Phud Hong Leper Colony _ a sanctuary where she could live without social prejudice and disdain. The disease took away all her fingers, blinded her left eye and left her right eye partially sighted. She also had her right leg amputated as the nerve was severely damaged. But despite such disabilities, the 85-year-old is now living in good spirits as she has support from her relatives, and also from both leprosy patients and non-patients in the leprosarium.

Leprosy _ an infectious disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae* _ causes physical deformities in most cases. Due to severe nerve damage, a number of lepers suffer their fingers falling off and finally have to have their limbs amputated. This disorder has been thought to be a curse upon mankind. Lepers therefore usually become social outcasts and set a mark of disgrace upon themselves and their families.

Located in Ron Phibun district of Nakhon Si Thammarat province, the leper colony was established in about 1947 as a shelter for lepers to live their lives without fear and social bias. According to Prajuab Klinhomyuen, the colony supervisor, even though society's perception towards lepers has positively changed, a number are still living on the streets because they are the hated members of their own families, if not their community.



A large number of lepers are diagnosed with diabetes, so healthcare practitioners provide them with regular medical examination to check their blood sugar levels.

"This is the main reason why lepers who have lived with us do not want to return home," said the 60-year-old supervisor. Prajuab's parents were also lepers. They were sent to the colony from separate provinces, met, fell in love and got married. "At this place, everybody is equal. They do not need to fear being treated as a disgusting creature."

There are 12 leper colonies in Thailand that care for over 3,000 patients. Phud Hong Leper Colony alone, according to Prajuab, is home to 161 patients and more than 600 of their relatives. Most of the lepers are over 60 years old and each one has been treated to make them non-contagious. Each year there are approximately two to five deaths at the leprosarium, but these are not caused by leprosy. Instead, they die of age-related symptoms.

At Phud Hong Leper Colony, each patient receives a daily food allowance of 75 baht plus a monthly welfare allowance of 1,300 baht, which is not enough.

"I spend around 200 baht per day for food alone. Food sold here is not cheap," said Muay. "To save money, sometimes I have to cook for myself, but this is not always possible given I get easily exhausted due to my old age."

Yuan Arunruang, another 81-year-old leper, feels fortunate to have moved to the colony from Songkhla province when he was 20. Yuan was asked to leave school when he was 13 after his teacher noticed a white skin patch on his neck and sent him to the hospital for diagnosis. Then his nightmare started.

"Back then I had no idea what leprosy was. All my classmates were told by teachers to stay away from me to avoid infection. So whenever I got near them, they walked away. I felt so embarrassed," recalled Yuan.

At 41, Yuan had his left leg amputated following severe nerve damage and chronic wounds. The following year he met the love of his life at the colony. She was also a leper. They later got married and had two children. Both of their children are free of leprosy.



CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT

- Leprosy is not hereditary so the disease is not found in patients' children and grandchildren.
- Muay Saetang lost all her fingers, her right leg and her left eye due to leprosy.

- Sister Elisa Dumapit from Don Bosco Development Centre in Nakhon Si Thammarat regularly visits lepers in Phud Hong leprosarium.

For Yuan, the colony is not just an asylum. It is also a place where he got a job _ something he could never do elsewhere. Not long after Yuan relocated to the colony, he started to earn his living by teaching kids in the neighbourhood. He was also good at drawing portraits and this earned him about 200 baht a piece. Now that he suffers paralysis, his hands are no longer strong enough to draw. But in the colony, he can live with dignity despite his physical deterioration.

"I really love this place," said Yuan. "It is where I belong. Living here, I no longer feel embarrassed. I was even allowed to work. If I lived outside [the colony] and tried to find a job, I am sure I would be rejected."

Boontham Sukkasem was diagnosed with leprosy when he was 13. When the school headmaster asked him to quit studying, he was sent from his home in Chon Buri to a leper colony in Prachin Buri. He relocated to Phud Hong Leper Colony in 1978. Once a boy who was expelled from school, now Boontham is a committee member of Phud Hong Leper Colony cooperatives and is also a creative brain behind several projects in the leprosarium.

Just like most of the lepers at the colony, Boontham wishes people had better attitudes towards the disease. He wants people to understand it is curable and is not easily transmitted, and that lepers are also human beings and should be treated as normal people.

"The majority of people in the society still think lepers are nasty," commented Boontham, now 60. "When they see lepers wearing dirty clothes or those who are amputees, they are afraid they are going to spread the disease. Actually, lepers are just people with disabilities who need to be treated equally."

"In Thailand, the Persons with Disabilities' Quality of Life Promotion Act was enacted in 2007 and promises more comprehensive and better benefits for the disabled. But no matter how good the act, the law, the regulations for the disabled people are, people with disabilities are still the first group of people that society chooses to neglect and will be the last group they think of."

INFO FOR DONATIONS

Name of organisation: Phud Hong Leper Foundation

Address: Bangkok Post 136 Na Ranong Road, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110

Call: 081-900-4922

Bank transfer:

ACCOUNT NAME: "Phud Hong Leper Foundation", Account No. 218-0-13367-6, Bangkok Bank, Sunthorn Kosa Branch, Klong Toey, Bangkok.

CHEQUE: Send cheque payable to Phud Hong Leper Foundation, attn: Kusuma Bekenn, Phud Hong Leper Foundation, Bangkok Post Building, 136 Na Ranong, Kong Toey, Bangkok 10110

Fax pay-in or transfer slip with donor's address and telephone contact to fax number 02-240-3660, attention Kusuma Bekenn, Phud Hong Leper Foundation, for receipts. The donation is tax-deductible.

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