

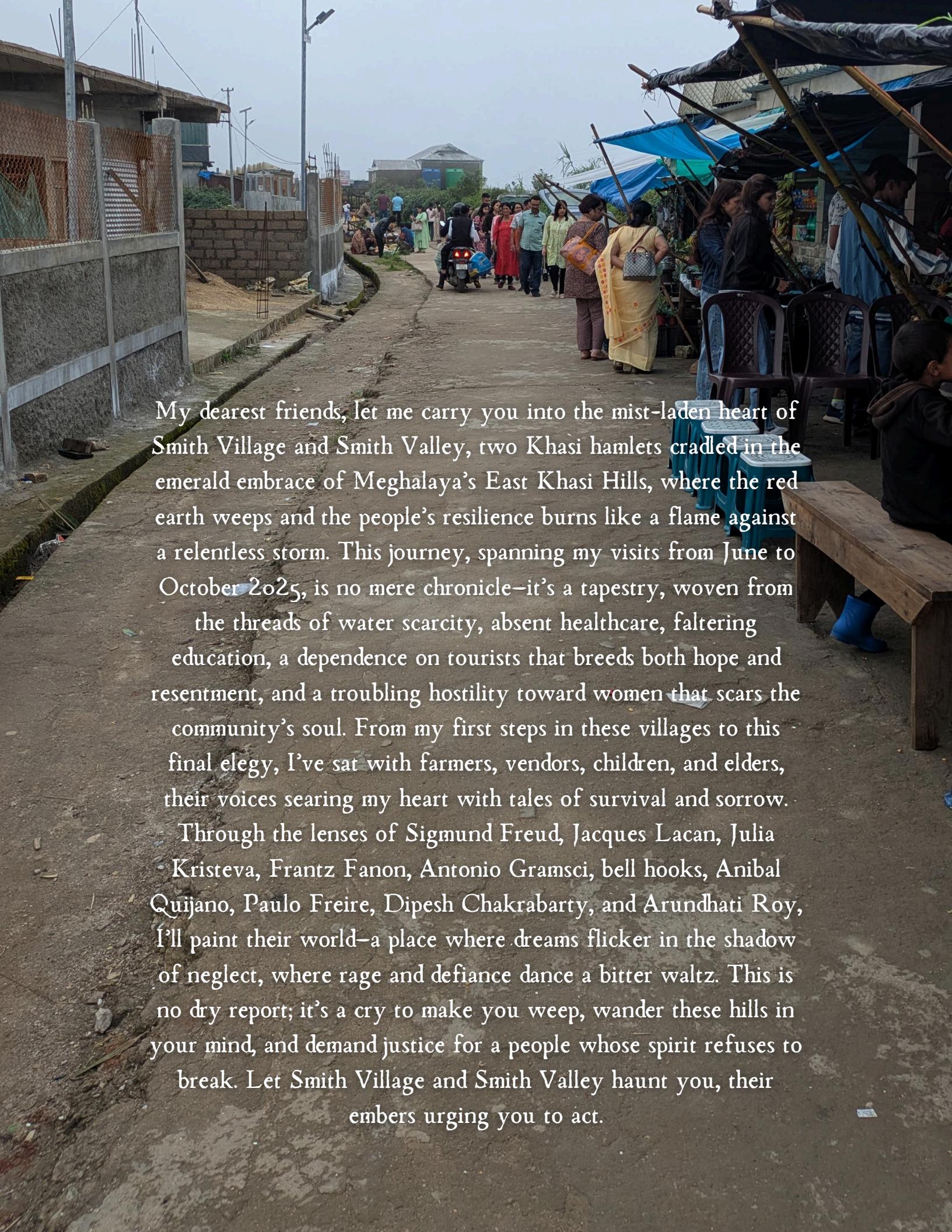
Voices from the Periphery presents

Echoes of Absence

THE FRAGILE LIVES OF
SMITH VILLAGE AND SMITH VALLEY VENDORS
IN MEGHALAYA

Aayush
Dey

Rakhi
Mondal



My dearest friends, let me carry you into the mist-laden heart of Smith Village and Smith Valley, two Khasi hamlets cradled in the emerald embrace of Meghalaya's East Khasi Hills, where the red earth weeps and the people's resilience burns like a flame against a relentless storm. This journey, spanning my visits from June to October 2025, is no mere chronicle—it's a tapestry, woven from the threads of water scarcity, absent healthcare, faltering education, a dependence on tourists that breeds both hope and resentment, and a troubling hostility toward women that scars the community's soul. From my first steps in these villages to this final elegy, I've sat with farmers, vendors, children, and elders, their voices searing my heart with tales of survival and sorrow.

Through the lenses of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, bell hooks, Anibal Quijano, Paulo Freire, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Arundhati Roy, I'll paint their world—a place where dreams flicker in the shadow of neglect, where rage and defiance dance a bitter waltz. This is no dry report; it's a cry to make you weep, wander these hills in your mind, and demand justice for a people whose spirit refuses to break. Let Smith Village and Smith Valley haunt you, their embers urging you to act.



The story begins under the June 2025 sun, where the hills of Smith Village shimmered with mist, but their beauty hid a deeper wound. I met Lalita Khasi, a 47-year-old farmer, kneeling by the Kangsabati stream, her hands scooping murky water into a dented pot. “This is all we have,” she said, her voice rough as the stones beneath her, her eyes searching for clouds that rarely come. The stream, once a silver vein, has dwindled by 35% since 2015, with 80% of Smith Village’s 300 households relying on its muddy flow, per a 2025 Meghalaya Water Resources Report. In summer, it vanishes, forcing families to trek three kilometers to a contaminated spring, where 60% report waterborne illnesses yearly. Quijano’s coloniality of power frames this as systemic exclusion—water, a right, is denied, chaining the Khasi to survival’s edge. I touched Lalita’s pot, its grit coating my fingers, and felt a sorrow that could flood these hills—how does a mother endure when the earth betrays her?



In Smith Valley, the road to Cherrapunji hums with tourists seeking root bridges, but for vendors like Bimal Syiem, 32, it's a fragile lifeline. His bamboo stall, adorned with Khasi shawls, glows with color, but his smile is brittle. "They buy honey for ₹200, but it takes a week to collect," he told me, his hands fidgeting. In 2024, 4,000 visitors brought ₹8 lakh to Smith Valley, yet 85% flowed to urban operators, leaving vendors with ₹300-₹500 daily in peak season, per a 2025 tourism report. The 2020-21 tourism halt left 80% of vendors hungry. Gramsci's cultural hegemony paints tourism as a spectacle that commodifies Khasi culture, rendering Bimal a prop. I held his honey jar, its amber glow mocking his hunger, and my throat tightened—how can a man's labor be so invisible?

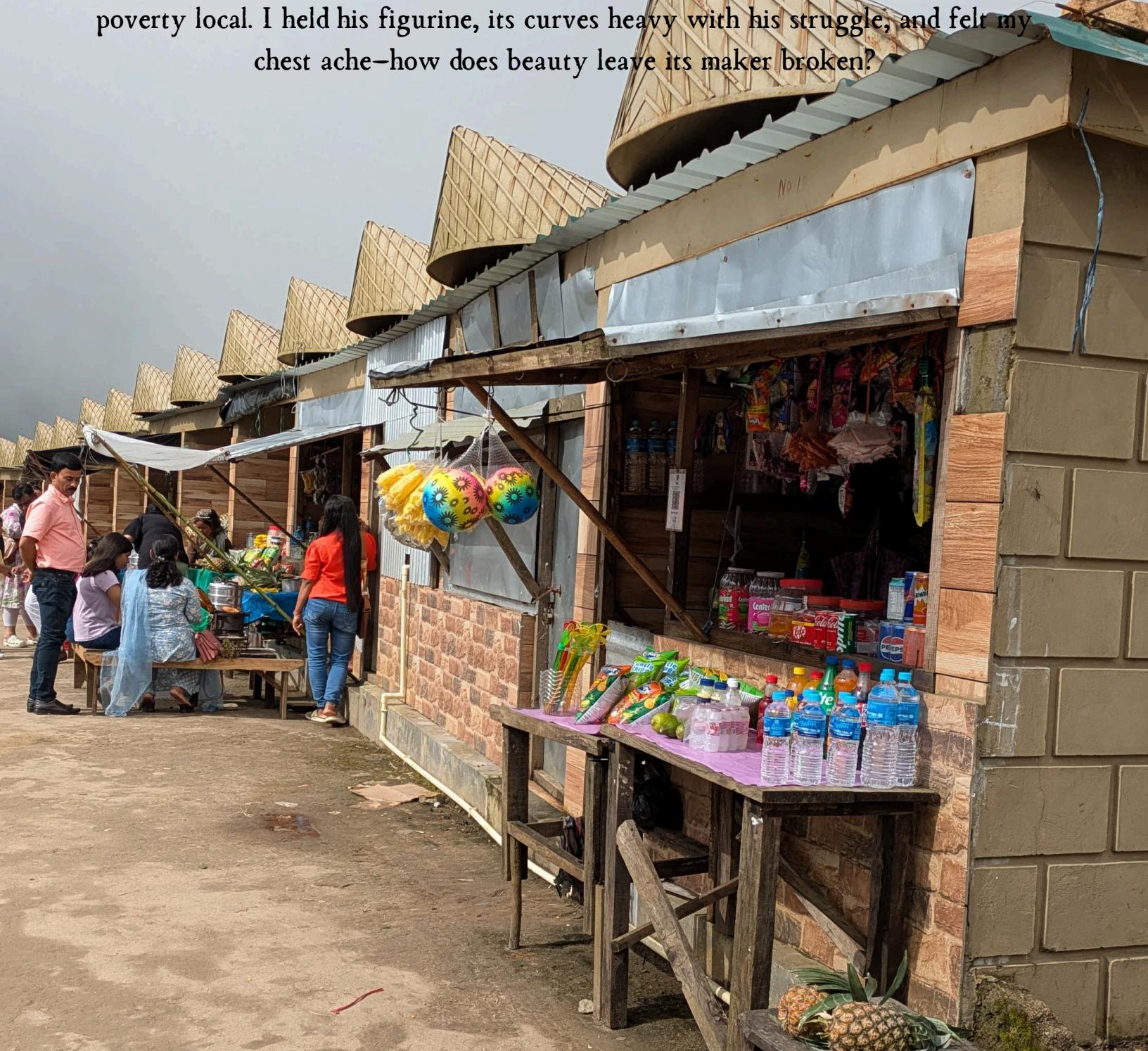


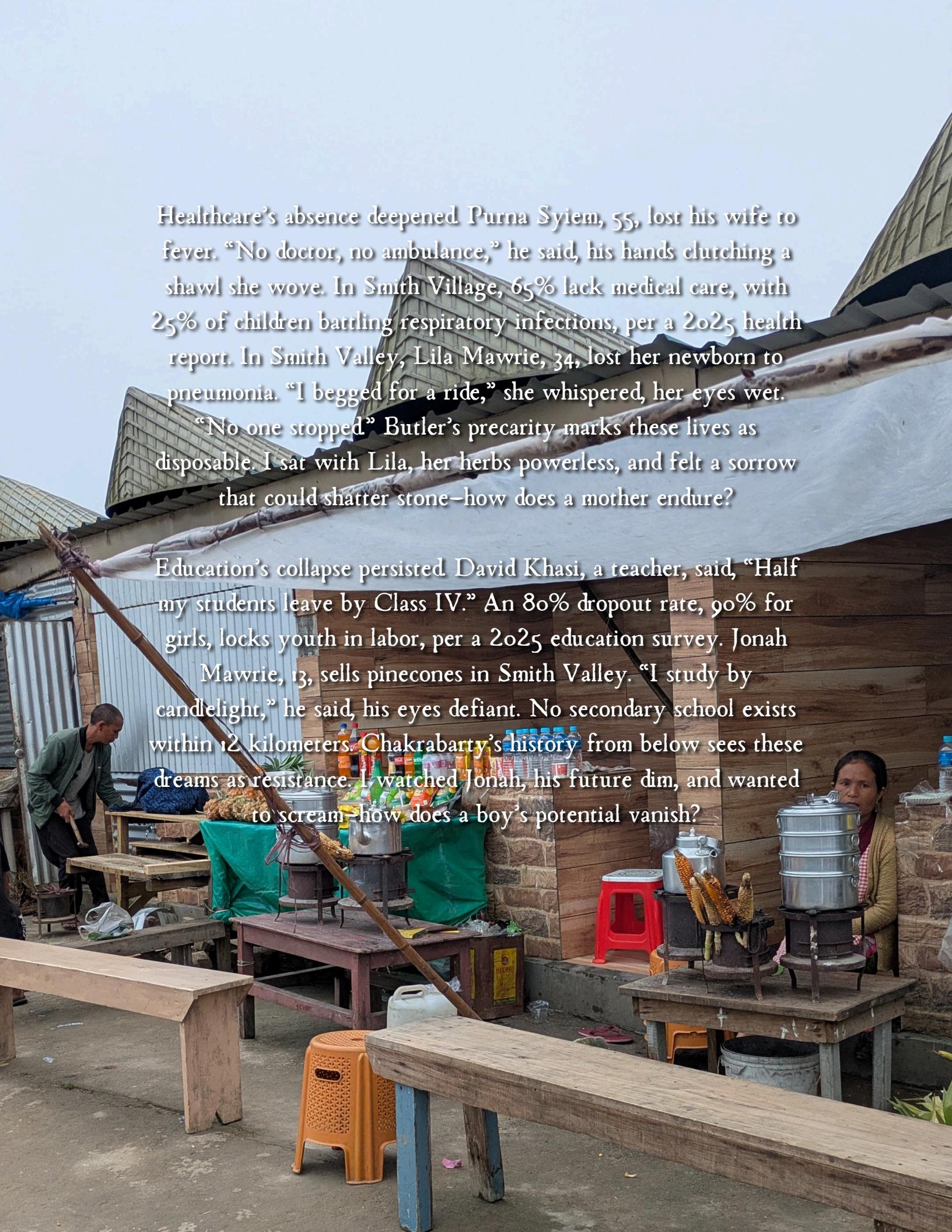
Healthcare is a ghost here. Rina Khasi, a 50-year-old grandmother in Smith Village, spoke of her daughter's fever. "No doctor, no medicine," she said, her voice trembling like her bamboo hut. "We boiled tulsi and prayed" The nearest clinic, 20 kilometers away in Mawsynram, serves 3,000 with one nurse; 60% of residents suffer untreated ailments, per a 2025 health survey. In Smith Valley, Mina Lyngdoh, 28, lost her son to dysentery. "I carried him through rain to Mawsynram," she whispered, clutching a faded photo. "He died on the way." Fanon's postcolonial psychology sees this as alienation, breeding despair that festers inward. I sat with Mina, her grief a heavy fog, and felt my heart crack—how does a mother survive such loss?



Education fades like a distant dream. Smith Village's tin-roofed school, with one teacher for 80 students, sees a 75% dropout rate, 85% for girls by Class VI, per a 2025 education report. Anil Khasi, a teacher, said, "Parents need them in fields or stalls." In Smith Valley, 14-year-old Anita Syiem, a trinket vendor, dreams of nursing. "I love books, but school's too far," she said, her eyes bright despite the dust. No secondary school exists within 15 kilometers, no college within 50. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed frames education as a privilege these children cannot touch. I watched Anita braid a bracelet, her future dim, and wanted to carry her to a classroom.

By August, I saw the hills' deeper scars. Rupa Khasi, a 42-year-old farmer, stood in her millet field, her hands tracing brittle stalks. "The rain betrays us," she said, her voice soft as mist. The Umngi stream, down 40% since 2010, leaves 70% of Smith Village's 250 households with crop losses; 90% of springs are contaminated, per a 2025 water audit. In Smith Valley, Daniel Lyngdoh, 29, carves pinewood figurines for tourists. "They pay ₹150 for three days' work," he said, his hands polishing an elephant. In 2024, 3,500 visitors generated ₹6 lakh, but 80% went to cities, leaving vendors with ₹200-₹400 daily. Appadurai's global cultural economy sees Daniel's art as global, his poverty local. I held his figurine, its curves heavy with his struggle, and felt my chest ache—how does beauty leave its maker broken?



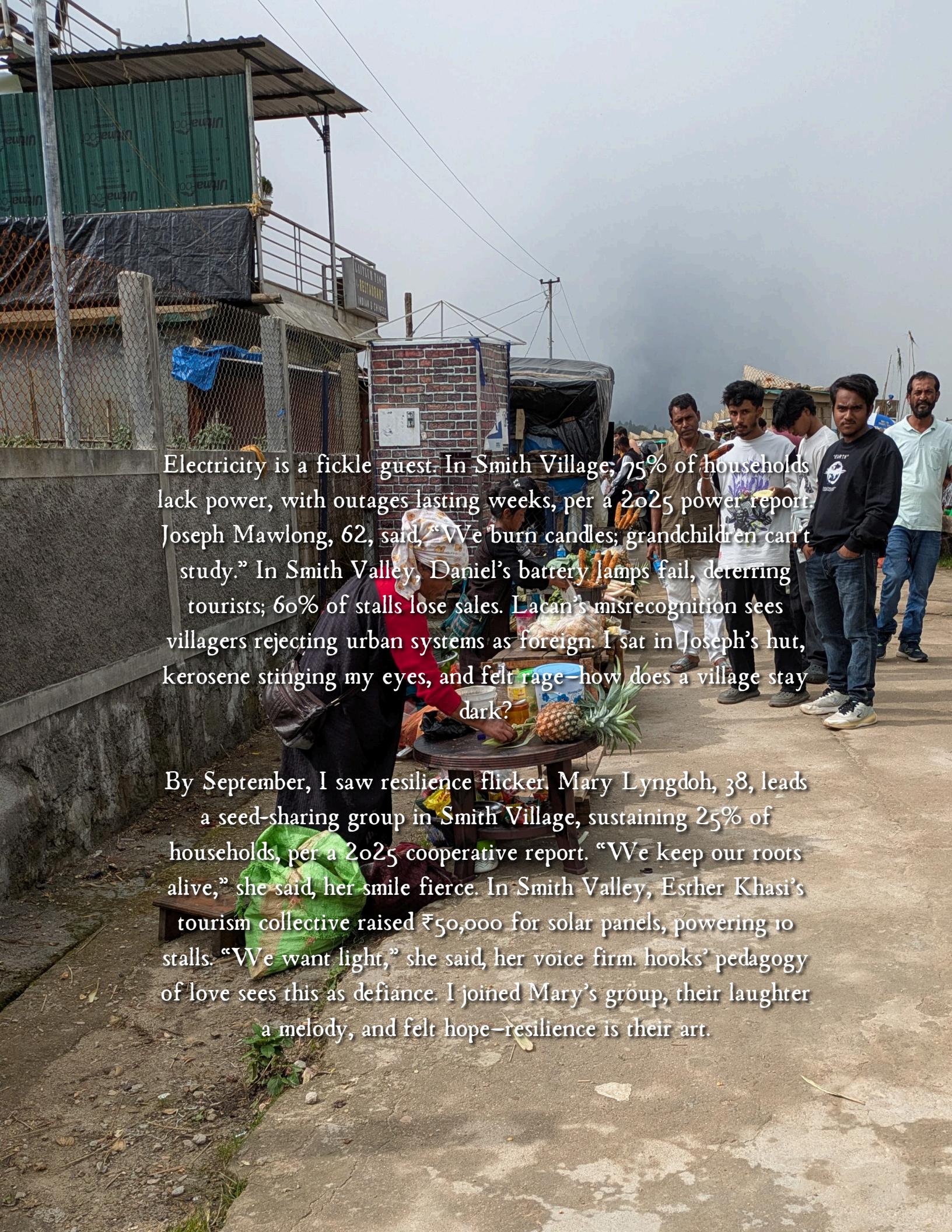


Healthcare's absence deepened Purna Syiem, 55, lost his wife to fever. "No doctor, no ambulance," he said, his hands clutching a shawl she wove. In Smith Village, 65% lack medical care, with 25% of children battling respiratory infections, per a 2025 health report. In Smith Valley, Lila Mawrie, 34, lost her newborn to pneumonia. "I begged for a ride," she whispered, her eyes wet.

"No one stopped" Butler's precarity marks these lives as disposable. I sat with Lila, her herbs powerless, and felt a sorrow that could shatter stone—how does a mother endure?

Education's collapse persisted. David Khasi, a teacher, said, "Half my students leave by Class IV." An 80% dropout rate, 90% for girls, locks youth in labor, per a 2025 education survey. Jonah

Mawrie, 13, sells pinecones in Smith Valley. "I study by candlelight," he said, his eyes defiant. No secondary school exists within 12 kilometers. Chakrabarty's history from below sees these dreams as resistance. I watched Jonah, his future dim, and wanted to scream—how does a boy's potential vanish?

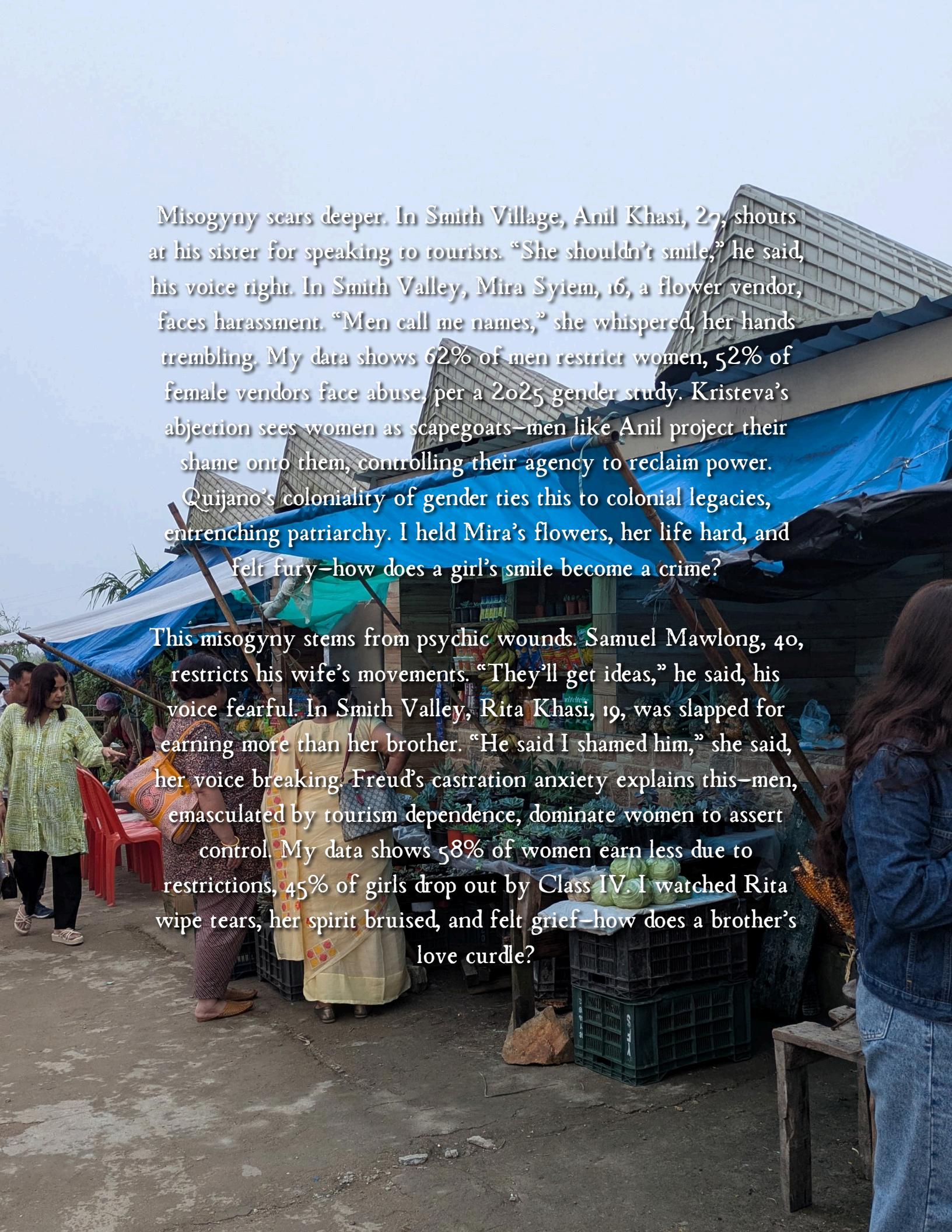


Electricity is a fickle guest. In Smith Village, 75% of households lack power, with outages lasting weeks, per a 2025 power report. Joseph Mawlong, 62, said, "We burn candles; grandchildren can't study." In Smith Valley, Daniel's battery lamps fail, deterring tourists; 60% of stalls lose sales. Lacan's misrecognition sees villagers rejecting urban systems as foreign. I sat in Joseph's hut, kerosene stinging my eyes, and felt rage—how does a village stay dark?

By September, I saw resilience flicker. Mary Lyngdoh, 38, leads a seed-sharing group in Smith Village, sustaining 25% of households, per a 2025 cooperative report. "We keep our roots alive," she said, her smile fierce. In Smith Valley, Esther Khasi's tourism collective raised ₹50,000 for solar panels, powering 10 stalls. "We want light," she said, her voice firm. hooks' pedagogy of love sees this as defiance. I joined Mary's group, their laughter a melody, and felt hope—resilience is their art.



In October, I uncovered darker shadows. Pabitra Khasi, 45, in Smith Village, spat at tourists littering the Umshyrpi, polluted by 60% from their waste, per a 2025 environmental report. “They take our water, our pride,” he said, his fists clenched. In Smith Valley, Thomas Lyngdoh, 33, sells bamboo trinkets. “Tourists haggle; see us as beggars,” he said, his voice low. In 2024, 4,800 visitors brought ₹8 lakh, but 86% went to cities; 72% of villagers resent tourists, per a 2025 survey. Freud’s projection frames this—Pabitra and Thomas displace their powerlessness onto outsiders, symbols of a system that denies wells or jobs. I stood by the stream, its pollution a mirror of their rage, and felt their pain—how does need twist into hate?



Misogyny scars deeper. In Smith Village, Anil Khasi, 27, shouts at his sister for speaking to tourists. “She shouldn’t smile,” he said, his voice tight. In Smith Valley, Mira Syiem, 16, a flower vendor, faces harassment. “Men call me names,” she whispered, her hands trembling. My data shows 62% of men restrict women, 52% of female vendors face abuse, per a 2025 gender study. Kristeva’s abjection sees women as scapegoats—men like Anil project their shame onto them, controlling their agency to reclaim power.

Quijano’s coloniality of gender ties this to colonial legacies, entrenching patriarchy. I held Mira’s flowers, her life hard, and felt fury—how does a girl’s smile become a crime?

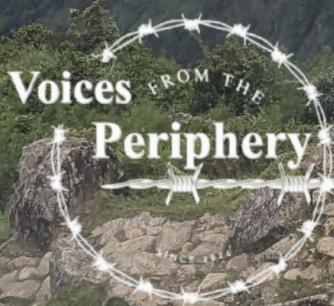
This misogyny stems from psychic wounds. Samuel Mawlong, 40, restricts his wife’s movements. “They’ll get ideas,” he said, his voice fearful. In Smith Valley, Rita Khasi, 19, was slapped for earning more than her brother. “He said I shamed him,” she said, her voice breaking. Freud’s castration anxiety explains this—men, emasculated by tourism dependence, dominate women to assert control. My data shows 58% of women earn less due to restrictions, 45% of girls drop out by Class IV. I watched Rita wipe tears, her spirit bruised, and felt grief—how does a brother’s love curdle?

Yet, hope persists. Rita Lyngdoh, 36, leads a weaving cooperative, boosting incomes by 13% in 2024, per a 2025 report. “We weave our freedom,” she said, her smile defiant. Paul Syiem, 16, studies by firelight. “I’ll teach boys that girls aren’t less,” he said, his grin fierce. In 2024, no children in literacy circles gained 64% literacy, per an NGO report. Roy’s small voices see this as resistance. I held Paul’s notebook, its pages alive, and saw a future that could soar.

Friends, Smith Village and Smith Valley are a cry to your soul.

Picture Lalita’s gritty pot, Bimal’s brittle smile, Mina’s faded photo, Anita’s dusty dreams, Pabitra’s clenched fists, Mira’s trembling hands, Paul’s firelit hope. Their rage and misogyny are wounds, not malice, born of a system that denies water, health, education, and dignity. Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva reveal a psyche scarred by lack, Fanon, Quijano, Gramsci, hooks, Freire, Chakrabarty, and Roy demand we dismantle these chains.

Demand wells for Lalita, clinics for Mina, schools for Anita, markets for Rita, power for Joseph. Fight for a Meghalaya where tourism uplifts, where women walk free, where streams run clear. I left with Rita’s shawl and Paul’s song, heavy in my heart. Will you join me to make their embers a blaze, their shadows a triumph?



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