

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY PRESENTS

Detailed Survey Report on

WE LIVE AFTER NIGHTFALL

**The Lives, Labour, and Resistance of Sex
Workers in Bolpur–Prantik and Shantiniketan**

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Introduction

NIGHT AS SHELTER, LABOUR, AND SURVIVAL

In the heart of Bengal's cultural utopia, Shantiniketan—home to Rabindranath Tagore's ideals of humanism, creativity, and community—thrives a parallel world that the daytime narratives rarely speak of. Just beyond the tree-lined paths and artisanal markets, in the shadow zones of Bolpur–Prantik railway line and peripheral settlements, live dozens of women and transgender sex workers whose lives unfold not through verses, but through negotiated violence, economic need, and embodied resistance.

This case study draws from field observations and over two dozen anonymized interviews conducted in Bolpur-Prantik and nearby parts of Shantiniketan. It attempts to foreground the realities of sex workers—most of whom are Muslim or from tribal (Santhal, Bagdi, Oraon) communities, and navigate multiple layers of marginalization based on caste, gender, religion, class, and profession.

Their bodies are policed, consumed, and criminalized. Yet their voices are full of humour, clarity, rage, desire, and resilience. This is their story.



Demographics

GENDER, RELIGION, AND THE POLITICAL BODY

Among the sex workers we met:

All were women, with two transgender persons

The majority were Muslim women, mostly from low-income households in Murarai, Rampurhat, and interior Birbhum

Several were Santhal, Bagdi, or Oraon women, often first- or second-generation migrants from nearby tribal hamlets

Most were mothers, some widowed, others separated or abandoned

Ages ranged from 18 to 47

Education levels were low: some studied till class 4 or 5, most were functionally literate

“We are not here by choice, we are here because every door was shut,” said Person A, a 38-year-old Bagdi woman.

Their Muslim and tribal identities, already marked in the dominant social order, made their position in the sex trade even more vulnerable to stigma, policing, and systemic neglect.

Living Conditions and Economic Practices

The sex workers reside in tiny rented quarters, often shared between two or more women to reduce costs. A typical room is 8x10 feet, with a mattress, a plastic mirror, some utensils, a bulb, and a fan.

Rent: ₹800–₹1200/month

No lease agreements, no tenant rights

Electricity connections are informal and often overpriced

Sanitation is abysmal—no private toilets; some depend on open defecation or shared facilities

“We keep Dettol and incense. We try to stay clean. But the place stinks in summer. What to do?” said Person C, a 30-year-old Muslim woman from Nalhati.

Most sex workers also engage in secondary labour:

Tailoring and stitching during the day

Housekeeping or dishwashing in nearby hotels or homes

Some sell cheap snacks or hand fans during Sonajhuri market hours

This form of dual labor is both empowering and exhausting, as they toggle between respectable invisibility by day and illegal hypervisibility by night.



The Nature of Work

CLIENTS, CONSENT, AND CASH

Sex work typically begins after 8:00 pm and continues until around 2:00 or 3:00 am.

Clients include local men (teachers, rickshaw pullers, shopkeepers) and visitors from Kolkata, Durgapur, and Burdwan

Payments range between ₹500 and ₹1200 per service, varying by demand, location, and appearance

Many clients are repeat visitors; some are married men

“One man brings chocolate every week. He stays for 15 minutes. Then goes back to wife and children,” said Person F, a 22-year-old tribal woman.

They are frequently asked for sex without protection. Government-supplied condoms are free, but branded ones are not used unless brought by the client.

“If he refuses condoms, I charge ₹300 more. It’s not ideal, but what can we do? We have to eat,” said Person D.

Alcohol, Risk, and State Collusion

Clients often bring cheap alcohol and insist on drinking during or before sex. While women tolerate this, it often leads to verbal abuse, physical assault, or refusal to pay.

“Last year a man broke my hand. I had to beg to a local NGO for money to get plastered,” said Person I.

The role of the police is a textbook example of state-sanctioned illegality:

The sex workers pay monthly ‘safety fees’ of ₹500–₹800

In return, police turn a blind eye to their trade

When violence occurs, police sometimes intervene—but rarely file FIRs

“They treat us like meat. But when police come, they talk like we’re criminals. They take our money and leave,” said Person B, a transgender worker.

This creates a parallel political economy, where legality is sold in installments, and justice is never promised.



Family, Education, and Dreams

Almost every woman had dependents—children, elderly parents, or disabled siblings.

Most girls pulled out their children from school due to bullying or shame

Children are often told their mothers are maids or tailors

No childcare support, no welfare cards, and no identity documentation for many

“My son wanted to study science. But his teacher asked him in front of class: ‘Is your mother that whore near the railway?’ He stopped going,” said Person H, a Muslim woman from Suri.

Despite the hardship, most women expressed dreams of leaving sex work—starting a tea stall, opening a tailoring shop, working in garment factories. But social stigma and capital scarcity block these exits.

“If I go to rent a shop, the owner asks: ‘Are you that woman from Prantik?’ Then he says no,” said Person G, who once worked in a garment unit.

Transgender Lives

VIOLENCE AND FETISHIZATION

The two transgender workers faced unique layers of vulnerability:

Denied government IDs, ration cards, housing

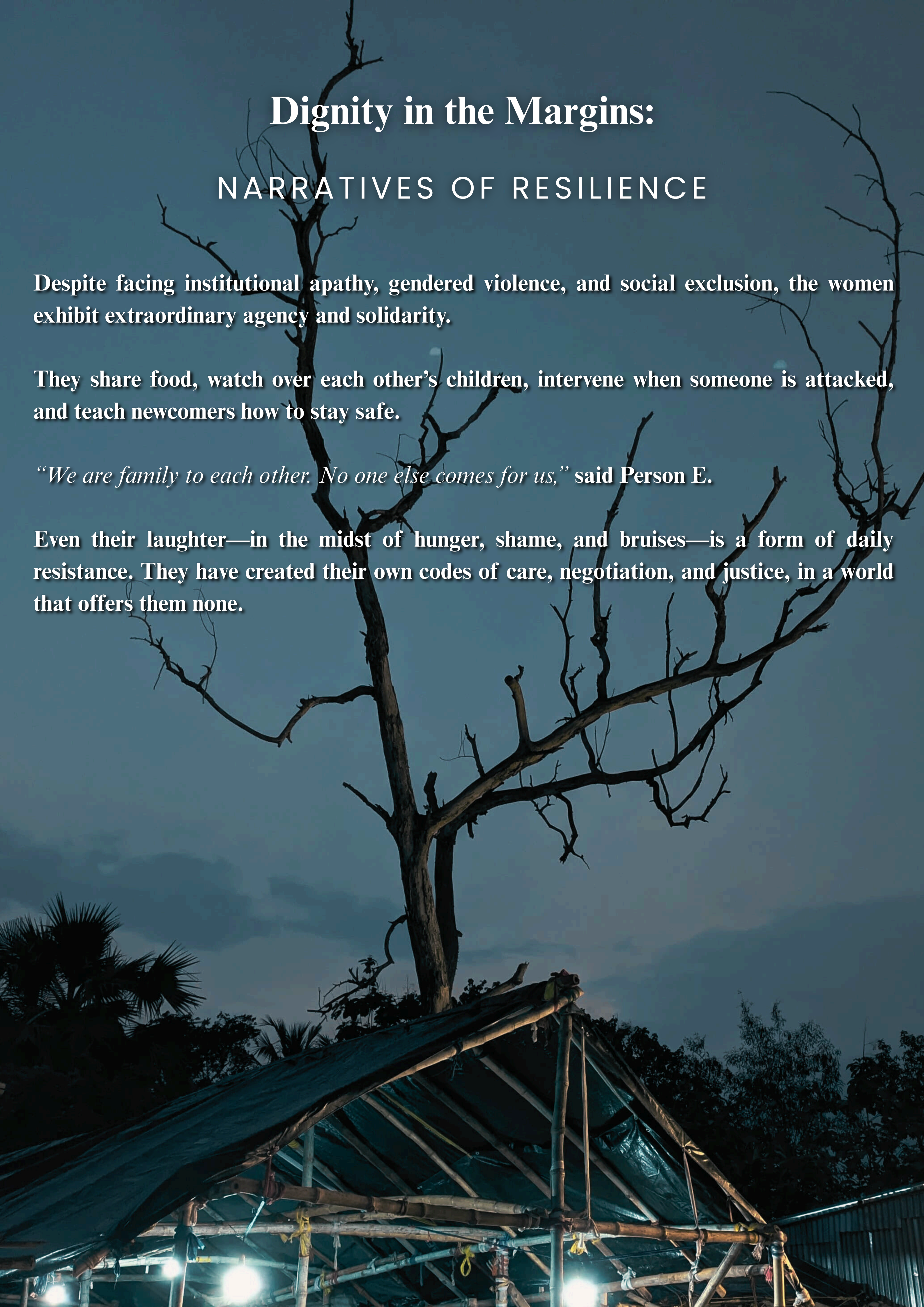
Clients fetishize them but also mock and underpay them

NGOs often exclude them from female-centered health and hygiene schemes

"I am neither man nor woman in their eyes. But they want to touch me when they are drunk," said Person B.

They live with constant threats—not only from violent clients, but also from neighbors and random passers-by.





Dignity in the Margins:

NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE

Despite facing institutional apathy, gendered violence, and social exclusion, the women exhibit extraordinary agency and solidarity.

They share food, watch over each other's children, intervene when someone is attacked, and teach newcomers how to stay safe.

"We are family to each other. No one else comes for us," said Person E.

Even their laughter—in the midst of hunger, shame, and bruises—is a form of daily resistance. They have created their own codes of care, negotiation, and justice, in a world that offers them none.

Theoretical Reflections: Reading the Margins

INTERSECTIONALITY (KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW)

The sex workers face multiple, intersecting oppressions—as women, as Muslims or tribal individuals, as poor, as mothers, and as illegal laborers. These identities do not stack—they collide, producing unique forms of violence and invisibility.

SUBALTERNITY (SPIVAK, GUHA)

These are speaking subalterns, but their speech is ignored, delegitimized, or criminalized. Even when they narrate their lives, it is either for NGO metrics or journalistic consumption—not policy transformation.

INFORMAL STATE AND POLITICAL SOCIETY (PARTHA CHATTERJEE)

Their existence is permitted not by law but by negotiated corruption. They are members of what Chatterjee calls “political society”—living outside legal recognition but inside coercive surveillance.

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY (SYLVIA FEDERICI, NAILA KABEER)

Their reproductive and emotional labor sustains not just their families but also male pleasure economies. They are care workers, wage earners, and sexual laborers rolled into one, with none of the protections that industrial or service workers receive.



Conclusion

THE RIGHT TO DIGNITY, NOT JUST SURVIVAL

The sex workers of Bolpur–Prantik are not merely “fallen women” as dominant morality claims—they are labourers, survivors, strategists, mothers, cultural critics, and invisible pillars of the informal economy. They do not ask for pity. They demand safety, education, dignity, and choice.

To understand them only through shame or saviorism is to do them further harm. What they need are:

Legal recognition and protection

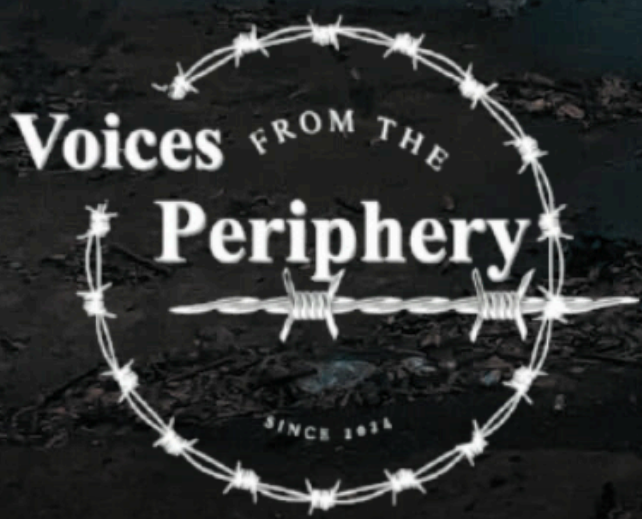
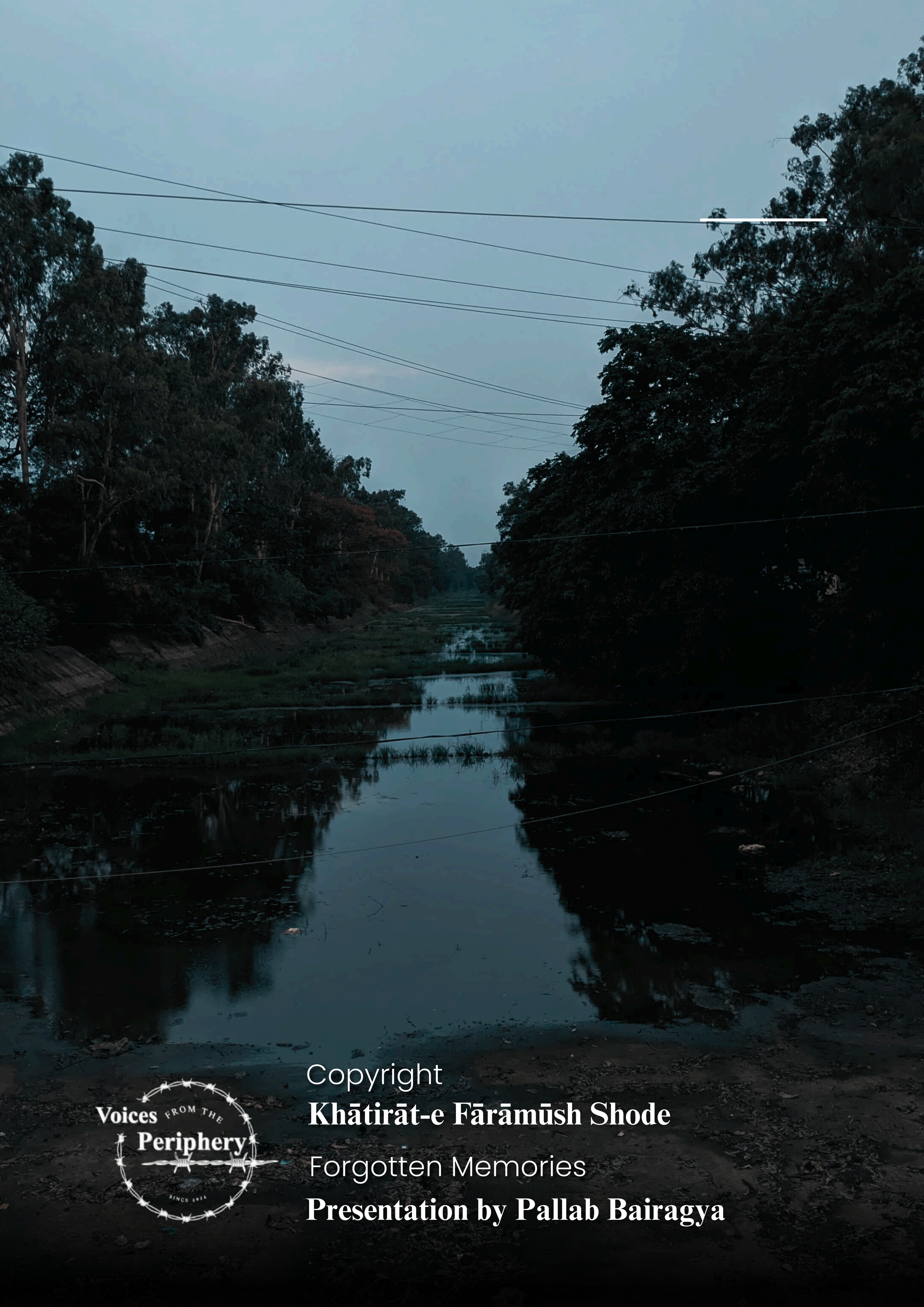
Health and housing services

Educational dignity for their children

Protection from police and political extortion

Freedom to dream beyond sexual labor

Let their story not be another secret behind a shuttered door. Let it be a testimony to what justice must include.



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Forgotten Memories
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