

**Killing Us Slowly: Pre-Emptying Suicide at a Women's Hostel in Chennai**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on ethnographic research in Chennai to unpack the pre-emptive logic that shapes anti-suicide interventions at hostels – dormitories – for college-going women in this city. Its central contention is that a concern for the production of a presumed future becomes, in hostels, a governmental technology that is used to limit young women's lifeworlds in the present. These regimes of intervention reinforce the unliveability of attachments, intimacies and affects that popular discourse and scaled-up demographic narrative associate with the potential for suicide. Building from this, the paper also shows that such regimes engender feelings of suffocation and attrition among the young women who live in hostels. 'Being slowly killed' as they call it, draws attention to suicide not as a spectacular event but as a site where the terms of everyday life are remade.

## **Introduction**

Many of the small, privately-run hostels that accommodate college-going women in the city of Chennai in Southern India do not have ceiling fans, and air-conditioning is well beyond the means of those who live in them. Given the extreme heat and humidity of this coastal city year-round, this is a curious state of affairs. This was the case at Theresa Ladies' Hostel, a residential hall for undergraduate college-students in the centre of Chennai, where I lived for seven months in 2012 and 2013, while conducting fieldwork in this city. At this hostel – as in others that I visited – many of the larger windows had been painted shut, and all balconies were sealed off. Originally an apartment building, the hostel now accommodated about two hundred students in dormitories of up to eight beds. I had the top bunk across from the door in my dorm: a privileged spot because there was the occasional chance of a breeze. As we sweltered together, no one said anything about the missing fans and lack of ventilation. Eventually, I asked one of my roommates what had happened to the balconies, the windows and the fans. She only took her eyes off her Korean soap opera for a moment to answer, 'suicide prevention'. Another roommate, also watching the same television romance, added drily, 'We are not allowed to kill ourselves. So, they are slowly killing us.'

In an article exploring narratives of attrition occluded in widespread reportage of youth suicide, Jasbir Puar (2012: 157) calls for 'dialogue about ecologies of sensation and slow death' in contexts where the blinding spotlight on suicide often leaves in the dark less spectacular scenes of slow debilitation. This paper is, in some ways, a response to that call as it focuses on demands made on the living in a time when panic about a 'suicide epidemic' is sounding aloud in urban India. Examining the management of suicide at hostels for women in Chennai, the paper unpacks pre-emptive regimes of anti-suicide intervention that engender environments in which young women feel worn down: in the words of my roommate, as if they are being 'slowly killed'.

Soaring rates of suicide are a subject of increasing concern in the public discourse as well as for the state in India. Between 2005 and 2015, the national rate of suicide grew by over seventeen per cent and remains significantly higher than global averages (Mythri and Ebenezer, 2016). Patterns also suggest variations from typical global demographics. For one, suicide in India is highest in regions that perform well in metrics of literacy and employment, particularly the Southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Patel et al. 2012). Further, suicide rates in India are also exceptionally high among youth and women (Vijayakumar 2015). As growing numbers of educated youth kill themselves, anxieties about frustrated ambitions for social mobility accrue. Waiting, scholars have shown, is increasingly a condition of everyday life (Jeffrey 2010): an essential psychological skill for survival (Chua 2011) in a context where the promise of India's 'liberalization' – shorthand for the cultural, political and economic shifts towards market-led development from the 1990s onward (Donner 2012, Radhakrishnan 2011, Jeffrey 2010) – has failed to materialise. As suicides among educated middle-class youth spiral upwards, a mounting sense of precarity at the heart of the neoliberal fantasy of the good life in urban India is palpable.

In this context, the aftermath of suicide becomes a dense site of affective investment, as the state, public institutions, families, and the press, all attempt to fix the cause of individual suicides and scale them up to generalizable patterns (Widger 2012, Chua 2014). The ontological power that suicidal deaths exert as 'always already known on the basis of perceived and reported demographic patterns' (Chua 2012: 204) undergirds pre-emptive practices of 'risk management' at the women's hostels, on which my research focuses. These disciplinary regimes anticipate and foreclose affects, tendencies and intensities of feeling linked to the reported causes of suicidal deaths. Functioning through patterns of association that scholars have studied in the pre-emptive management of terrorism and obesity (de Goede and Simon

2013, Evans 2010), suicide becomes a site through which affects in the present are managed in the interest of producing liveable futures.

Anticipatory logics are increasingly key to geographical engagements with biopolitics, with growing attention to how decision-making in the present exerts both spatial and temporal control over uncertain futures (Amoore 2009, Anderson and Adey 2011). While preventive intervention addresses a defined threat, pre-emptive governmentalities enact discipline in a ‘future anterior’ tense (Povinelli 2011: 23): disciplinary measures in the present, however debilitating, are justified because they will have been worth it in a putative and desired future. As political battles over futurity command bleak narratives of what is to come, systems of ‘algorithmic security’ (Amoore 2009) that use patterns of association and repetition to anticipate future potentials have come to be pervasive. Regimes of anticipation shape life – if in varying degrees of intensity – as much in border-zones with declared states of emergency (Allen and Vollmer 2017, Amoore and De Goede 2008), as at the heart of the neoliberal dream in Indian cities where a proliferation of technologies and disciplines anticipates threats to everyday middle-class life (Anand and Rademacher 2011, Doshi 2013). As this logic plays out, suicide becomes more than a spectacular event, stretching to include subjects who are biologically alive.

In focusing on this calculus of risk, this paper reorients the debate on suicide away from asking why people kill themselves, to instead examine the experience of attrition that attends the management of suicidal potential. Slow violence has been increasingly studied as a mode of uneventful deterioration: ‘of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent, often in phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact’ (Berlant 2007: 758-759). Scholars of slow violence write about the gradations through which disability is made a condition of everyday life, rather than a state of exception (Snyder and Mitchell

2010). As subjects at risk – for obesity, cancer, suicide (Berlant 2007, Jain 2007, Livingston, 2009) or indeed for terrorist radicalization and for debt failures (Puar and Rai 2004, Li 2010) – whole populations find themselves ‘living in prognosis’ (Jain 2007: 79). In focusing on pre-emptive anti-suicide intervention, in this paper I argue that governmental technologies seek to produce liveable middle-class futures by limiting the lifeworlds of young women in the present.

In this, the paper also complicates the scholarship on social abandonment, focusing on slow death not at the margins of the neoliberal fantasy (Li 2010, Biehl 2005) but at its heart: in the lives of educated, middle-class women who are subjects of national and neoliberal investment as reproducers of the ‘good life’. Even as young women in India migrate in growing numbers to cities for education and employment, they find their lives subject to proliferating networks of surveillance. These forms of control are increasingly normalised and justified within a discourse of ‘risk’ that, as feminist scholarship has shown, conflates the danger of sexual assault with anxieties about young women’s exercise of sexual agency outside caste and communal lines (Shandilya 2015, Parikh 2017). Care of the self – as an ethical practice in subject-making (Mahmood 2011) – is materialised here in the cultivation of attachment directed away from objects of risk (Patel 2007). The labour of self-making in this mode, it has been argued, is simultaneously life-building and exhausting (Berlant 2007). In the moment of heightened risk inaugurated by anxiety about suicide in the lives of young middle-class women, this labour of making ordinary life becomes suffocating: a form of slow death.

Hostels for women – dormitory-style boarding houses that offer ‘respectable’ accommodations in cities – materialise carceral conditions (Moral et al. 2017) in this context, using surveillance and enclosure to enforce gendered discipline. They participate alongside the Indian courts (Baxi 2014, Mody 2008), educational institutions (Lukose 2005) and the medical establishment (Chua 2014, Pinto 2011) in a multi-scalar exercise of governmentality to secure national futurity by disciplining the bodies of young women. Most women I met came from

small towns in Tamil Nadu and Kerala and belonged to the ‘other backward classes’: neither Dalit, nor high-caste. While they all – without exception – identified as middle-class, I treat this as an aspirational category (Gilbertson 2014, Radhakrishnan 2011). In this, I draw on the widely-made argument that social mobility for ‘backward’ communities in India entails the rearticulation of selfhood in step with the time of development and national modernity (McDowell 2011, Ciotti 2010, Patel 2000).

In examining anti-suicide intervention in this context, this paper pursues two interlinked lines of enquiry. First, it asks how the anticipation and foreclosing of affects and tendencies marked as ‘suicidal’ engages anxieties about futurity and articulates the boundaries of the liveable. Second, it examines how everyday life is remade in the context of pre-emptive intervention: what does ‘slowly killing’ feel like? Building on these arguments, the final section of the paper uses a ghost story to interrogate the ways in which young women fantasise about refusing normative futurities.

### **Framing Pre-Emption: Hostels, Middle-Class Futures and Suicide**

At the heart of this paper are questions about how gendered bodies subject to discipline are drawn into governmentalities that produce time and territory. Geeta Patel (2000: 47) writes that the making of national time in India requires practices of subject-making that establish a relationship to the future through ‘a domesticated insinuation into gender in which a woman desires and represents both timeless tradition and modern commodities.’ Since the 1990s, scholars have commented widely on this ‘balancing act’ (Gilbertson 2014) that is integral to the making of middle-class selfhood in India and particularly argued that its burdens fall to young women (Mankekar 1999, Lukose 2005).

Hostels, as institutions that contain potentially-dangerous affects and redirect them towards liveable futures, offer a useful entry point through which to examine the geographies of discipline that produce this balancing act. In this, they emerge as sites of convergence where

imperial imaginaries about young Indian women as lacking in mental maturity (Mukherjee 2006) endure and find expression in contemporary neoliberal anxieties about liveable middle-class futures (Gilbertson 2014). Founded from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, hostels were established in the context of the imperial feminist and reformist impetus to modernise Indian women by removing them from their homes (Grewal 1996, Kent 2004). Equally in hostels founded by Indian feminist reformers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Pandita Ramabai, as in those established by Christian missionaries, young women were drawn into ethical projects of self-making through routines of exercise, regularly-timed meals, and moral education (Grewal 1996). While these institutions were established concurrently with similar boarding-houses in North America and Europe, hostels across the colonial world were more explicitly carceral (Demian 2017): in Chennai – then called Madras – they had high walls as well as bars on windows (Author 2017). Scholars have shown that anxieties about contagion justified the segregation and containment of pathologized communities such as prostitutes in brothels (Legg 2014) and lock hospitals (Hodges 2005). The hostel might be located in much the same assemblage of social sanitation: albeit on the other side of the coin as oases of safety in disorderly cities, where respectable middle-class womanhood was to be fostered (Author 2017).

Partha Chatterjee (1989) has made the argument that nationalist discourse in India located women in the interior space of the home: territorialising both in the service of an incipient national community. Attention to the history of women's education suggests that this was reinforced, and indeed the modern albeit quintessentially Indian home imagined and materialised through women's studies curricula (Hancock 2001), and the cultivation of domesticity in the women's hostel (Author 2017). Since independence, preoccupations among policy-makers with women developing the 'wrong' attachments that might detract from desirable national futures – often in language that explicitly associates the 'correct' emotional

education of women with national development – has justified enclosure and surveillance in hostels (Author 2017). In 2017, Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Maneka Gandhi refused to consider repealing curfews at government-run hostels because young women's 'hormonal outbursts' might draw them into transgressions that would jeopardize their futures as respectable women (Staff 2017).

The hostels I visited in Chennai were all policed by security guards, who checked identity cards. The corridors of most hostels have CCTV cameras monitoring everyday activity. The walls were topped with glass fragments: for the avowed purpose of keeping intruders out, but also successfully preventing any wall-jumping on the part of residents. This last feature recalls barbed wire and other technologies of enclosure in the carceral spaces of prisons and camps (Chari 2008). It simultaneously echoes the caging of women in brothels in colonial India, to which Legg (2014) attributes similar rationale, reiterating the place of the hostel in the carceral landscape of gendered discipline in India. The wardens at these institutions saw themselves as acting *in loco parentis* in the lives of hostel residents. The forms of care (cf. Mahmood 2011) that they enacted reinforced young women's inscription within the discursive and territorial claims of family, community and nation-state.

Suicide is inextricable from the wider landscape of risks – that of an improper love affair, pregnancies outside of wedlock, failure in examinations – that haunt the lives of young women, and from which the enclosure of the hostel purportedly protects them. Beginning with Durkheim (1951 [1897]), philosophical engagements with the sociality of suicide have sought to understand motivations of suicidal death. Research in South Asian Studies has built on this to attribute socio-historical context to suicide: for instance, 'honour suicides' during the sub-continent's Partition in 1947 (Butalia 2017), widow-burning in Colonial India (Mani 1987), and suicides in the shadow of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka (Widger 2012). The changing landscape of romance and intimacy in India is, further, closely associated with suicide. Echoing

the ‘honour suicides’ of the 1940s, the ‘lesbian suicides’ of the 1980s and 1990s suggested same-sex-sexuality as a site of social incommensurability (Dave 2011). These ‘lesbian suicides’ are part of a cultural landscape in which the joint suicides of heterosexual couples – typically of different castes and religions – occupy an important place. Suicide circulates here as the logical conclusion of the risks that haunt young womanhood: some attachments are so impossible to make commensurable with everyday sociality that they can only find their resolution in death.

These social explanations for suicide find their feedback loop in public institutions’ preoccupation with the cause of suicide. The National Crime Records Bureau, which collects data on the causes of death in India, classifies every suicide into one of twenty causal brackets. Popular narrative circulates alongside, drawing legitimacy from this statistical regime (Chua 2012), telling gendered, classed and caste-inflected stories about why suicides occur. In the context of the growing concern to intervene in suicidal potential, archetypes rooted in normative visions of respectable middle-class futurity thus become sites from which pre-emptive governmentalities are enacted in hostels to secure national and neoliberal futures. The attempt to commit suicide was criminal in India until the Mental Healthcare Act was passed in 2017. This shift has had, in my experience, no effect on pre-emptive regimes at hostels that address not actual suicidal attempts but potential to suicide, rooted in social narratives of unliveability. Pre-emption entailed decision-making acts that functioned in this context as ‘tools of closure’ (Anderson and Adey 2011: 2879): it reinforced spatial and semiotic boundaries in acting on discourses about the causes of suicide in young women. Functioning as ‘petty sovereigns’ (Butler 2006: 65), hostel wardens and deans made decisions in their everyday encounters with the young women who lived in these institutions about the potential for suicide that might lurk at hand. In reading suicidal cause back from the individual body of suicide to demographic pattern, pre-emptive logics asserted a semiotic chain that moves

‘seamlessly from body to intent to behavior to event’ (Chua 2012: 208). The suicidal body thus materialised was a figure of abnormal, backward and dangerous attachments: lacking in the capacity to reproduce proper middle-class life. Indeed, the potentially suicidal young woman is iterated in pre-emptive interventionist practice both as, and at the boundary of liveable subjectivity.

### **Potentially Suicidal**

‘If they can’t be responsible for themselves, send them to therapy’ my roommate Chitra declared, as we sat on her bed, chatting at Theresa hostel one evening. Chitra and I were talking about a recent scandal at her college: a student’s expulsion for having been seen leaving a hotel with a young man with whom she had presumably shared a room and bed the previous night. Chitra was twenty: a final-year undergraduate in Psychology. Our conversations typically centred on her ambitions. She wanted to get a PhD someday, and maybe migrate to Canada. Chitra believed that there was ‘a time for love’ and that it had to be done ‘responsibly’. In the case at hand, Chitra agreed that the institution had acted rashly in expelling the student but believed that the correct course of action would have been to send her to psychological counselling. It was not that Chitra saw sex outside marriage as a sign of mental illness. Instead, she argued that to act without consideration for social reputation was ‘not healthy’. In her opinion, these were signs that the young woman in question did not care about her own future and was potentially suicidal.

Chitra was not alone in this view. Most of the hostel wardens I met held that young women were often driven by latent suicidal intent in making choices that would inevitably lead them to disrepute. Sometimes, they made biological explanations, presaged by the history laid out in the previous section: arguing that young women were simply too ‘undeveloped’ and had ‘hormonal problems’ because of which they were drawn to making inappropriate choices. One warden told me that she had read young women’s brains were not yet fully developed at the

age of eighteen. She argued that if this was truly the case, the age of majority should be raised to twenty-five years, and hostels given even more powers of intervention than they had. In these logics, the future is brought into spectral presence as a precarious site of aspiration, and the suicidal subject was both always already present and also emergent as a subject dislocated from the narrative of development.

Given the association between futurity and development, state actors too participated in and reinforced this logic. Uma, a representative of the Tamil Nadu AIDS Control Society (TANSACS), a government-run organisation that dispenses sex education in schools and colleges told me that she defined any sexual act in which young women participated whilst knowing it would lead to social disrepute as ‘risk-taking behaviour’. To engage in risk-taking behaviour, she further explained to me, suggested that the woman in question may already be suicidal. This was, in her opinion, especially the case for same-sex desiring women. Uma clarified that she did not believe that desire between women was ‘abnormal’. It was however, ‘dangerous’ because it suggested to her that the women in question had become so disembedded from their social milieu that they had ceased to care if they should lose respectability. Further, she told me, such intimacies were usually forms of ‘obsession’. Why else, she asked rhetorically, would so many lesbian couples give up their lives – ‘forgetting the parents who gave birth to them’ – for the sake of their attraction to each other?

Uma’s reference to the sensationally reported ‘lesbian suicides’ of the 1990s (Dave 2011) draws attention to the power that narratives of cause hold in shaping anti-suicide decision-making. Non-heterosexual desires occupy, within development narratives in India, the awkward place of being both too forward in their avatar as LGBT identification, and throwbacks to a precolonial past in their iteration in local registers of affect and non-binary gender identification (Ramberg 2016). Uma saw desire between women at hostels as belonging

to the latter order: it came, she told me, from a ‘backward’ lack of exposure that some women had to men their own age.

In this discourse, the same-sex desiring young woman is rendered a subject out of time. She is not located in a global future where *It Gets Better*, referring here to US-based columnist Dan Savage’s YouTube campaign that promised gay teenagers bright futures if only they could grit their teeth and wait in the present. Nor is this subject positioned in a pre-modern past: instead, the same-sex desiring young woman is iterated as a figure without futurity and out of sync with time, a potentially suicidal young woman in need of intervention. As such, in Uma’s work at government-run hostels for women, she classified as being ‘at risk’, women who pushed their beds together in dormitory rooms, those who slept overnight in friends’ rooms, as well as those who ‘day dream[ed] too much’. All of these, she told me, were signs of ‘obsessive love’: an unhealthy feeling that was suggestive of suicide in potential.

Hostels where young women lived became, in these narratives, spaces where fantasised futures that could not find a place in the proper futures towards which these young women have been educated, must be left behind. In this, they were simultaneously sites where potential futures were imagined and produced, as well as zones of abandonment for affects and attachments that could not be carried forward into respectable middle-class futures. As I will elaborate in the penultimate section of this paper, the hauntedness associated with hostels brought into animation the unliveable potentials that circulated in these institutions and found expression in spectral encounters.

Additionally, in producing knowledge about young women as potentially suicidal, pre-emptive regimes also disrupted interstitial practices that allowed young women to transgress norms of respectable femininity in playful ways. Indeed, secrecy is widely held to be a common-sense aspect of respectability in Tamil Nadu. Women keep, and are often advised to keep, secrets about the messy edges their lives might acquire. Risk surfaces here in the

precarious construction of respectable realities in young women's lives. Secrecies are often central to young women's ability to 'play a bit' when they are away from family surveillance and living in an urban hostel in order to attend college. Close knit circles of friends covered for each other, keeping secrets both from college authorities as well as senior female students, or male students from the young woman's community or district. With expanding networks of surveillance in the hostel, the young women I met found it frustratingly difficult to engage in the forms of 'naughtiness' and 'silliness' that they saw as iconic of their life as 'youth'. Additionally, being 'caught' now results in a trip to the on-campus counsellor.

As anxieties about suicide grow, colleges and hostels in cities like Chennai are under increasing pressure to offer counselling services on campus as part of the available welfare provisions for students. When such services are offered, they are often advertised on these institutions' prospectuses and admissions forms as evidence of the 'global quality' of education that they offer. Most students I met rarely, if ever, took advantage of such services. As scholars like Sarah Pinto have shown, psychiatric explanations for mental illness are widely seen as incommensurate with experience in India (Pinto 2011). Further, many young women experienced psychotherapy as punitive. Given that College authorities most often required students to be counselled when they broke institutional rules, the young women I met did not trust College Counsellors. In some cases, psychotherapists had revealed details of sessions with college administrators without the consent of the patient, resulting in disciplinary action on the bases of events that students had discussed in ostensibly confidential settings. Foucault (2003b) argues that psychiatric power works with the family and within a network of carceral institutions – here mainly the hostel – to produce discourses of 'truth'. Being marked 'potentially suicidal' was, in the lives of the young women I met, a site where the purported abnormality of their affects was brought into visibility: simultaneously also materialising the imaginary of the desirable 'good life'.

In his work on poverty and caste in North India, Bhughupati Singh (2015) notes the potential for play to turn violent and tragic. He argues that playful insulting turns violent when the register of intensity on which it is being performed changes. Positing an intimacy between relations of power and those of joking and play, Singh (2015) suggests that playfulness skirts a boundary between harmless joking and violence. This precarious boundary is, for young women living in hostels in cities like Chennai, the site of everyday life. Within it, rather than as an exception to it, secrets threaten to come to light and position subjects in moments of life or death. Far from mitigating distress and averting suicide, many young women experienced the college's anti-suicide intervention as a site where 'playing' realities acquire seriousness in their narration to counsellors, and in their iteration as potential causes of suicide.

In these circumstances, many young women experienced new regimes of anti-suicide intervention in the loss of potential futures to anxieties about suicide. One of my roommates told me that she 'hated' the people who killed themselves: they made it worse for everyone else. Pre-emptive regimes, Massumi (2007) argues, are unfalsifiable: the threat's failure to emerge is as much proof of their effectiveness as the threat's ultimate emergence. The case of anti-suicide intervention is a study in this unfalsifiability. Even in hostels where no one in recent memory had killed themselves, the phantom figure of the potentially suicidal young woman lurked in the transformations that this figure of threat had wrought to the shape of normal and everyday life.

### **Slowly Dying**

In 2015, I sat in a dusty library in Chennai reading a College Magazine from the 1970s, where I found an early reference to changes in the institution's architecture that engendered feelings of suffocation. An alumna of Queen Mary's College, the oldest institution for women in the city had returned to visit her on-campus hostel only to find that it had been transformed unrecognizably (Krishnaswamy 1974). Most jarringly, a net now rose over and tented the

terrace, giving her ‘a caged feeling’ (Krishnaswamy 1974: no page numbers). In the present, the explanation I had heard about the netting over the terraces at the Queen Mary’s hostels was that someone had killed themselves from these buildings. Of course, that rumour does not appear in a magazine printed by the college: suicide is usually seen as too shameful for institutions to acknowledge in the pages of their publications. Today, nets and trellises are not only normal but seen as essential aspects of a ‘safe’ hostel, alongside CCTV cameras, watchmen, curfews and the high walls that enclose – without exception – every hostel I visited in Chennai. Exceptional measures have been so normalised that to be without them seems to many just reckless.

Enclosures mark cartographies of power, as well as producing racialized and gendered visions of futurity through containment (Chari 2008). Reflecting their predominant concerns with the interlinked projects of disciplining affect and embodiment, the architectures of hostels invite particular forms of inhabitation. For instance, at Theresa Hostel, the warden’s rooms were positioned directly across from the main courtyard area where the residents gathered. As such, this was a place for disciplined and ‘folded in’ comportment, as one of my roommates put it: you could get in trouble for strutting, running around or leaving your hair loose. Architectures also serve the purposes of pre-emptive governmentalities in that they condition bodies to move in particular directions, anticipating and foreclosing transgressions (Adey 2008; Kraftl and Adey 2008). In this milieu, the young women I met spoke of feeling ‘suffocated’ and of their ‘stomach(s) dropping’ and ‘being followed everywhere’. They felt freezing cold in the height of summer in sweltering rooms with no windows and ‘[saw] suicide’ in the haunted hard architecture of the hostel. Enclosures, to them, were most importantly, places of surveillance.

This was driven home to me in the lack of locks on the doors of dormitories at most hostels I visited. As I was checking into Theresa Hostel, the warden told me of this and added

that if I wanted to do anything that required locked doors but not a bathroom, then I should question the morality of what I was doing. Echoing a familiar social reformist discourse about open spaces as associated with moral behaviour (Grewal 1996), rules of this kind suggest sites where imperial logics endure in contemporary development regimes. The lockless doors allowed the warden to enter any room she wanted anytime for ‘spot checks’. At Theresa and many other hostels, all meals were catered and students were not allowed to keep objects like knives and hot plates. The rule against knives was explicitly linked to suicide. Arti, my roommate made a slashing motion to her wrists when I asked her why she had to keep a paring knife for fruit hidden away under her mattress. A first-year student who did not take the rule seriously was suspended when the warden found a knife she had been using for the jam sandwiches she liked to eat. Similarly, pesticides, which are widely used for suicide in South India and Sri Lanka (Widger 2012), are contraband in hostels. This is again a product that many young women possess: mainly because hostels are notoriously overrun with ants and cockroaches. At most hostels however, the presence of pesticides is a sign of ‘suicide risk’.

Everyday life in the hostel was particularly transformed when anti-suicide interventions made young women intensely aware of the surveillance they were under. I met Kalai, a young woman who came from a lower-caste fishing community in Southern Tamil Nadu, at the canteen at an institution I will call NT College. Students like Kalai are among the many beneficiaries of Tamil Nadu’s long-standing affirmative action policies and their presence marks the growing representation of lower caste students in urban educational institutions (Subramanian 2015). When I met her, Kalai had been recently referred for anti-suicide counselling sessions after showing anger at the hostel. She had yelled at a group of women at her hostel when they laughed at her English: this was something Kalai was very sensitive about. In response, the warden had deemed her a ‘suicide risk’. Wardens who made such referrals saw students’ anger – particularly that of Dalit, lower-caste, non-urban and working-class students

– as a sign that they were ‘breaking’ or losing the capacity to perform the all-consuming task of waiting. This is a familiar narrative in the history of universities’ responses to Dalit students’ distress, and even in the reading of cause in Dalit students’ suicides (Committee 2008).

After her psychotherapy session: an experience that she found humiliating, Kalai felt that she could not even legitimately feel angry in her hostel. Indeed, she told me, she no longer knew what she was waiting for while she was ‘being good’. For fear of losing her reputation or indeed being seen as suicidal, Kalai had passed up several opportunities for romance. She had decided to postpone fun and trips to the cinema because she knew her younger siblings’ educations depended on her getting a job straight out of college, and for now, she told me, she was content to study hard. But her lack of fluency in English appeared to be jeopardising that. She kicked a plastic chair as we spoke: all she wanted was to have a government job, and be married in ten years, with enough savings to buy gold earrings. Was it worth it, though, she asked me? Was this life she was living really a life? Here the boundaries between zones of ‘making live’ and ‘letting die’ (Foucault 2003a) are not distinct: indeed, rather than referring to distinct populations that are abandoned or allowed to thrive, governance occurs at the level of the sub-individual capacities of bodies in contact zones with systems of surveillance (Puar 2009).

Surveillance affected young women viscerally, drawing their bodies into performances of ‘good womanhood’. Sara, a first-year student from Kerala, told me she had taken to smiling in the corridors both at her hostel and in College. She did not want the CCTV cameras that lined most hallways in both to catch her looking disgruntled or upset and get her in trouble. Sharifa, one of a minority of Muslim women at Theresa Hostel, told me that she felt that even the walls had eyes. She had taken to sitting inside one of the closets in her dormitory, where she could be sure no one was watching. While this seemed an isolated incidence at first, I soon learned that several hostel-residents did this. This recalls McKittrick’s suggestion (2006) that

concealment constitutes resistance to the racialised – and in this context caste-inflected – territorialising of women's bodies. In refusing to be seen by the camera, women like Sharifa carved out places of escape from the exhausting labour of being 'good' respectable women, without necessarily subverting it in a transformative way.

As technologies like cameras increasingly enter the fray in monitoring young women's mobility, hostels might be understood as bioinformatic zones where anti-suicide systems are mobilized to make decisions about the kinds of affects and attachments that are 'livable' – intelligible within normative visions of futurity (Butler 2004): Susan Wolf argues that to live within such intelligible frameworks is to be 'sane' (Wolf 1987) – and desirable middle-class futures. Within this logic, the potentially suicidal body is poised on the porous boundary between life and death: in inhabiting this context, young women engaged a *thereness* (Stevenson, 2014: 4) that stretches suicide, rendering it less a spectacular event and more the condition of possibility in which everyday life is remade. Further, the carcerality of the hostel is brought alive in such instances of hiding within the hostel – allowing for a break from the normative monotony of reproducing the ordinary life (Berlant 2007) – in the literal articulation of a place away from surveillance.

### **Refusing Futurity**

I first heard about Lily when I was spending time with the Drama Society at an institution that I will call Church College. Halfway through the day, in a moment of girlish playfulness, one student started chasing another with her water bottle, threatening to pour the water on her. The student who was being chased collapsed from giggling and squealed: 'I'll tell Lily about you one of these days, and then you'll see.' Who is Lily, I asked, expecting that she was a warden. In response to my question one of the girls around me stood up solemnly and recited:

*Lily O Lily*

*Help us not to be so silly*

*As to fall in love with the Dhobi*

*For we have come here to Study*

Lily, it turned out, was a favourite hostel ghost. Over the course of that day and later, I learned Lily's story. Early in the life of the college, the young women told me, Lily had lived in Room Eighty-Four, in the topmost floor of the College's Main Hostel. Built in the 1920s, the Hostel is a crumbling colonial building, with rooms organised around an open, garden courtyard at the centre of which square patch that was once a pond. Constructed both to facilitate ease of surveillance and to provide light and air, the building originally had large open balconies that have since been closed in. No one can remember exactly when the screens and shutters were put in: the earliest memories of them are in the 1960s. Lily, the story goes, was a student sometime in the 1930s or 1940s. Like many young women, we are told that Lily fell in love for the first time whilst she was at College. Unfortunately for Lily though, her lover was the college *dhobi*: the man who washed the clothes of the women in the hostel. Besides being working-class, *dhobis* typically belong to the *vannaan* caste: a Dalit group, whereas – while the story doesn't explicitly tell us – we can assume Lily came from an upwardly-mobile Christian family. The girls who tell this story never feel the need to explain why such a marriage would be impossible and it might be banal to do so: suffice it to say that middle-class Christians consolidated social respectability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by continuing to practice some aspects of caste, especially in matters of marriage (Kent 2004). Missionaries rarely came in the way of this and the first Principal of Women's Christian College in Madras successfully intervened to separate the couple, when one of her students eloped with a man of lower caste and class (McDougall 1940). Given this history, it is hardly difficult to believe that Lily was 'gated' when the warden eventually found out about the affair and that the *dhobi* lost his job.

‘Gating’ is a punishment that is familiar across the British postcolonial world and continues to be applied in some form in many British boarding schools. Once gated a student could not go out of the residence hall for anything other than classes. At the College, even in the present, students are gated for as long as three or four months for infractions as small as keeping an untidy room. In this punishment, Lily’s life strikes a particularly intimate chord. Whether anyone identifies with her falling in love with the *dhobi* or not, gating is a widely-shared experience, and the women who told me Lily’s story passionately identified with her experience. ‘Gating’ is, to many, a significant site of the attrition that they talk about. When they are ‘gated’, young women experience ever-more intensely, the feeling of being shut-in: one of the narrators of Lily’s story told me how ‘gating’ – especially when it extended over several weeks – made her feel like the walls were moving closer.

And so, like those who tell her story, we are told that Lily grew frustrated with her confinement, and while we do not know if she was trying to escape or actually kill herself, she is said to have jumped from the balcony of Room Eighty-Four and fallen into the shallow pond in the middle of the courtyard, dying a bloody death. Some versions of the story say that as soon as she hit the pond, she was transformed into a lily flower that remained alive for as long as there was water in the pond. The Hostel, in this version, is said to have let the pond go dry and filled it in with concrete, in a final attempt to stamp out Lily’s persistent presence in the hostel albeit in a different ontological state. The metaphor is apt at an institution that does everything in its power to make suicides forgotten: most prominently, refusing to grant the customary day off to let students mourn their classmate.

Mourning suggests attachment, even dispossession: ‘If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself’ (Butler 2003: 12). When hostel authorities do tell the stories of suicides, they do so as cautionary tales. Subverting this, young women found ways of mourning: making sense of the stark

unfamiliarity of the hostel when suicide presses into it. In their dwelling with the playful ghosts of suicide, they brought alive Walter Benjamin's suggestion that laughter is the other side of lament (Benjamin 2003). Through figures like silly Lily, young women inhabited violently subversive possibilities in which it is possible to refuse the labour of making middle class futurity through suicide. To return to the problem of happiness within feminist studies of discipline and futurity: in killing herself, it would seem, Lily refused attachment to the object of failed promises. Haunting, it has been argued (Holloway and Kneale 2008), opens up potentials: undoing foreclosed geographies. Lily's leap from her hostel room might be thought to unleash the violent potential of suicide as a site of play.

Indeed, Lily is a friend to the students: their ally and co-conspirator in their romantic travails. While her story is tragic, they tell it in a cheery, almost triumphant tone. Students claim to sense her presence in the hostel and occasionally, elsewhere in College. She is known to pull pranks – move things about, and make things fall. Telling her story was always an ebullient thing: Lily is not a tragic heroine so much as a figure of defiance, who has refused to leave a hostel that has repeatedly tried to get rid of her. The circulation of Lily's story is undoubtedly a site of tension. College authorities accuse senior students of spreading lies in telling junior students Lily's story. Considered deleterious to the college's reputation, the story is forcefully dismissed as a fiction. Ghost stories in general, I was frequently told by college authorities, were unhealthy, even 'backward'. As much as being suicidal, believing in Lily was a sign of abnormal attachment. However, the young women to whom I spoke told me that Lily was no *pei* – a Tamil category of spirit widely associated with possession (Ram 2013) – and believing in her was not 'backwardness' or 'superstition' to them: equally conscious of their status as 'modern' subjects. She is a hostel ghost, whose existence gestures to a past that is wrenchingly plausible. She was a spirit for a disenchanted world – simultaneously inviting political engagement and marking a site where the project of modernity has failed: in many

ways, the most appropriate haunt for a hostel founded to render young women modern. She was dangerous because the secrets she carried were modern nightmares that repeated themselves again and again in the women's hostel: appearing *unheimlich* in the space of 'not backward' and 'not irrational'. Lily lingers in the hostel, repeating her story to generation upon generation. In her presence, the hostel appears ruinous: its fabled modernity is a history of loss, and its prestigious history a story of imprisonment.

In telling Lily's story, thus framed, the present time of youth is rendered spectral: it is heavy with the intrusions of what has been excluded from its narrative - what is unliveable and unsayable - slowing it down as it hurtles towards adulthood and its trappings of the good middle-class future, bidding it to stop and remember. In laughing at, and with Lily a gap is opened that is otherwise closed, just as in sharing Lily's secret-that-is-not-a-secret, a space for future secrets is opened. To laugh in delight at the thought of Lily soaring in the sky before her spectacular fall to the ground – only to be turned into a flower is both a morbid fantasy of suicide, and a fairy tale of transformation. Here, the prince is not kissed and turned from frog or beast to handsome lover. Rather, the young woman makes herself immortal in death, by turning into a lily flower, and remaining forever in a hostel where she shakes things, makes noises, and takes sides in student quarrels: living in a suspended time forever, rather than grit her teeth, and wait to grow up into respectable womanhood.

### **Conclusion: On Living in a Pressure Cooker**

'The hostel is a pressure cooker' was a common cliché among wardens and deans in Chennai about the tensions that circulated at these institutions. Pressure cookers are a ubiquitous presence in Indian homes and the most banal of dangerous household objects. When they blow up, they cause anything from inconvenient *dal* explosions to suspect deaths that hover between the implication of suicide and the possibility of gender-based or caste violence. The 'pressure

cooker' of potential suicide in India commands narratives of epidemic spread, bleakness and imminent threat to national futurity.

In this paper, I have unpacked regimes of pre-emption that undergird the management of suicide at women's hostels in the city of Chennai. Rather than ask why people kill themselves, this paper asks how ordinary life has been remade in the time of a suicide epidemic that looms over and threatens the much-vaunted manna of India's liberalization. In this, it suggests that pre-emptive engagements with suicide make subjects as much of the living as of the dead: the hostel's anti-suicide discipline draws all young women into an ethical project to direct attachment towards forms of futurity seen as liveable. Scholarly and popular commentaries alike on suicide in South Asia tend to take as their starting point, the fact of high and rising rates of reported suicide, particularly among the young and among women in this region. While the statistics indicate a pattern of increase in the rates of suicide, they are inadequate to explain the circumstances that shape the social experience around the incidence of suicide (Staples 2012; Chua 2012). The numbers instead justify violently pre-emptive regimes that ironically engender conditions of slow attrition that the young women I met described wryly as 'killing (them) slowly'. I have located anti-suicide regimes within the context of a more widely spread anxiety about risks to middle-class futurity, that are writ on young women's bodies. These anticipatory logics draw on popular narrative and scaled-up demographic details to target specific affective dispositions, tendencies and orientations as constituting 'suicide risk', and in doing so, they reinforce the unliveability of these affective orientations.

In making these arguments, I have positioned the women's college and hostel as institutional paradigms of the moral and cultural assemblage of development, in which young women are implicated as subjects of risk. Performing a disciplinary function, care in these institutions entails on young women participation in a national – and since the 1990s, neoliberal

– project of self-making: to become ‘good’ responsible subjects with attachments that are ‘happy’ in Sarah Ahmed’s sense (2010) in which happiness is a promisory note for a livable futurity. Attention to the slowed and unspectacular unfolding of scenes of attrition suggests that biopolitics in the modes of ‘making live’ and ‘letting die’ (Foucault 2003a) are closely enmeshed: the forms of care that are entailed in producing middle class futurity as a scene of thriving entail the letting die of capacities and attachments that are marked ‘unliveable’. In this, pre-emptive engagements with suicide enact disciplinary practices that make subjects of biologically living and ‘potentially suicidal’ young women as figures ‘at risk’, shaping their engagements with their futurity.

This calculus of risk acts pre-emptively and draws its subjects into ecologies of sensation that attune them to a sense of slowed time: of gradual debilitation that attends the rhythm of staying alive and waiting for when It Gets Better. This campaign, also referenced above, exhorted queer youth to wait out their difficult teenage years, promising them pictures of better futures through the experiences mainly of elite cis-gendered and white men. Within and beyond academic scholarship, a wide range of critiques have emerged that address this imaginary of the ‘better life’ ahead, as well as the burden of time that the campaign’s logic places on vulnerable youth to wait it out (Puar 2012; Patrick and Emily 2014). Pre-emptive anti-suicide regimes are comparable to this discourse of neoliberal queer potential centred on waiting because they construct a (homo)normative ideal of middle-class futurity – partnered or married, living in urban landscapes in the West, and with stable jobs and linear paths forward into social acceptance – as achievable if only young people could grit their teeth. Stretching this further, this paper has shown that in the context of anti-suicide intervention in South Indian hostels, regimes of anticipatory action fix the cause of suicide in seemingly unliveable desires and affective orientations.

In this, the suicidal person is constructed as an impetuous and failed neoliberal subject. To return to the context that this paper has explored, the suicidal young woman is ‘the rotten apple’ in the words of the warden at Theresa hostel: apt to spoil the barrel. Indeed, as with others whose deaths are rendered justifiable and necessary for the continued thriving of ‘ordinary life’, hostels do not allow students to mourn the suicides of their classmates because such deaths are instead rendered as futurity frustrated: they are ‘wasted lives’ on which there is simply no point dwelling. Spectral figures like Silly Lily play a key role in such contexts as sites of subversion, playfully marking the hostel’s violent failure in its project of making middle-class futurity. In telling such stories – even as they are silenced time and again – and ‘seeing suicide’ in the built landscape of the hostel, young women remember the potentials, relationships and truths lost to the making of the good middle-class life.

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