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Review Of "In Pursuit Of The Good Life: Aspiration And Suicide In Globalizing South India" By J. L. Chua

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In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India.

By JOCELYN LIM CHUA. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. xiii, 240 pp. ISBN: 9780520281165 (paper, also available as e-book).
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From Durkheim onward, social scientists have known that adverse social circumstances can lead to an upsurge of suicide. But if social adversity leads to suicide, then why should Kerala, which is often held up as a model of progressive social policies and successful development, be beset with a skyrocketing suicide rate? This is the conundrum that Jocelyn Lim Chua examines in the finely wrought ethnography *In Pursuit of the Good Life*.

To address this question, Chua eschews the sterile statistification that is customary among suicidologists. Instead, she uses suicide as a lens for examining living, death-making, and ideas about the good life in Kerala, a coastal state in southern India. In Chua's reading, suicide-like acts are not only an index of individual suffering, but also a social fact and a potent resource for cultural meaning-making. Chua's investigation pursues two intertwined avenues: How do various social actors in Kerala reckon the cultural, social, and personal circumstances that produce self-inflicted deaths at a rate that is thrice as high as that of the rest of India? And how do suicidal acts (both in practice and as societal discourse) shape quotidian modes of living and relating, as well as dystopian visions of life in Kerala?

Chua's involvement in Kerala, and particularly in Thiruvananthapuram (the city previously known by its colonial name Trivandrum), stretched over an eight-year period, including two years (2005–7) of intensive fieldwork. Judging from *In Pursuit of the Good Life*, this involvement paid off richly, affording Chua access to a variety of social commentators, including mental health experts, public servants, educators, and religious counselors. At the same time, Chua's sustained engagement in everyday life in Thiruvananthapuram enabled her to develop relationships with a variety of interlocutors. These included individuals who had engaged in suicidal acts or contemplated doing so, family members grieving the death of a loved one, and mental health personnel tasked with averting suicidal impulses.

The first part of the book takes up the problematization of suicide in Kerala. Chua first offers a critical reading of the narrative of Kerala's lauded social progress. Which sectors of the populace, she asks, have reaped the benefits of development and which sectors have been shut out? How have the images that beckon young people to improve their fortunes by migrating to the Gulf States (or beyond) reshaped aspirations and desires? In addressing such questions, Chua paints on a broad canvas, drawing on literatures on labor migration, development, anthropological theory, and modern South Asian social history. She notes formulaic scripts that inveigh against "overambition," consumerism, greed, and nucleated families as putative causes of self-harm. Such invocations of development's dark side can be recruited for various ends: they may serve as cautionary tales, as moral indictments, or perhaps as oblique political critiques. Chua's close observations of psychotherapists' struggles to assist potentially suicidal patients afford a window into starkly classed and gendered treatment options. For the poor, large doses of powerful psychoactive medications are the only palliative on offer, even though psychotherapists know that their usefulness is limited.

In the second part of the book, Chua shifts her focus to the terrain of intimate relations. How does the ever-present possibility of suicide color mundane activities and relationships? How do ideas of the good life change when self-inflicted death seems so near

at hand? How do discourses of self-harm figure as meaning-making resources? Chua details how dreams of migration (whether to the Gulf or further afield to Europe or North America) compound young people's dissatisfaction with staying at home. A chapter about parents and children registers the disquiet of parents and teachers in the face of spiraling rates of suicide. Although the official record shows few child suicides, popular belief has it that such suicides are common. What has gone awry in children's development? Where have parents and schools gone wrong? Are youngsters too emotionally fragile? Too indulged? Too pressured to achieve? How can one raise a child who will not succumb to the urge to self-destruct?

In Pursuit of the Good Life is an important addition to the expanding corpus of scholarship that interrogates suicide and suicide-like acts in South Asia. At the same time, Chua's reading of suicide as social suffering serves as a crucial counterpoint to the psychiatric literature. By embedding suicide in history, society, and culture, Chua counters the atomized representations of suicidal patients that appear in that literature. Her sensitive and respectful renderings of psychic pain contrast with accounts framed solely in terms of symptom criteria and diagnostic categories.

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BITS of Belonging: Information Technology, Water, and Neoliberal Governance in India. By SIMANTI DASGUPTA. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015. 232 pp. ISBN: 9781439912584 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911817001875

BITS of Belonging draws upon perspectives from the IT industry and the water bureaucracies in Bangalore to offer an interesting interpretation of contemporary citizenship in India. In a rolling account that tacks between units and players in industry, government, and the NGO world, Simanti Dasgupta portrays citizens' understandings of the transformative nature of the IT field alongside descriptions of the contradictory and disjunctive conditions of urban infrastructure and water supply. Data are presented ethnographically as excerpts from discussions, interviews, public relations reports, government documents, and current events. Without being overly theoretical or tedious with institutional and policy details, Dasgupta gives an original perspective on the possibilities and limitations of the software industry to infuse notions of governance into the body politic. The book is enlivened by references to ongoing trends and their relationships to the data and makes useful mention of urban planning milestones and key events. The expanding role of IT professionals in policy making, the global economic downturn, the middle-class capture of the state, and the spread of "Hindutva lite" through BJP rule are discussed in some detail as context for the analysis.

BITS of Belonging is of course a software metaphor but, as Dasgupta explains, it is also a metaphor for citizenship across India. In the midst of the deep structure of corruption, middle-class concerns hinge on expectations of timeliness, accountability, and transparency. The book does an excellent job of bringing the perspectives of IT and NGO leaders alive through accounts of the board and business meetings at Infosys and at the NGO Janaagraha. The ethnography also describes discussions with donor agencies