



Speaker: Mamta Sachan Kumar

Title:

Housewives Don't Retire: What Gender, Ageing and Housework Reveal about Flexing Citizenship in Kobe's Floating Sindhi Diaspora

Abstract:

15 years after documenting the history of Sindhi merchant settlement in Japan for my Master's thesis, I have returned to Kobe to find a diaspora that has withered. The Sindhi community has shrunk radically in scale and its surviving members have aged considerably - men and women alike, but differently.

Some of the merchants whose Osaka offices I had once sat in to record interviews with no longer make the daily commute. They are semi- if not altogether retired and now spend most afternoons cooped up in their bedrooms, lounging in front of the television. Or they go for walks - solo or in company, come rain or shine.

The women, however, are endlessly "busy" or "involved" - housewives particularly so. With their husbands now home across the day, they are even busier for the extra meal of lunch to prepare, for which they remain on their feet - fitter than the men in many ways but older nonetheless. For this reason, I have heard them complain constantly. This, and the inescapable fact that in Japan they have no choice but to work, for in Japan there is no culture of live-in help to ease their daily load. In Japan, households of permanent residents are officially identified on equal footing as Japanese households in that their occupants are not granted visas for full-time domestic workers. But Sindhi permanent residents are not Japanese - neither their cultural expectations nor the structures of everyday life that shape their households and family dynamics.

In this presentation, I share my preliminary observations of how housework, through the hectic lives of Sindhi housewives, offers insight into the culturally conflicting ways of an oldcomer, multi-generational community living in Japan but not grounded in their Japanese surroundings. Their position of relative privilege, choices, actions and ultimate exit strategies prompt a case of flexing citizenship in a diaspora that largely operates within its own bubble, and in doing so, floats.

Bio:

Mamta Sachan Kumar is a PhD Candidate in Gender Studies and Anthropology at The Australian National University. She is a graduate of the National University of Singapore (Department of Sociology). Mamta was born in Japan and maintains a research interest in the community of her childhood - the Sindhi diaspora in Kobe. Her work explores notions of home(land), belonging, identity, memory and nostalgia, through which she analyzes diaspora theory. Mamta is currently mid-fieldwork, gathering stories of Sindhi housewives in Kobe. She intends to apply a multisensory methodology that goes beyond observation by sight to understand women's roles in community life. Mamta's latest publication discusses the social value of kitty groups among rich Sindhi housewives in Singapore. Her work is featured in a special issue titled, 'Transnational Figurations of the South Asian Aunty' in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*.