

MAX PLANCK RESEARCH GROUP “Ageing in a Time of Mobility”

Lecture Series 2019

MPI-MMG, Hermann-Föge-Weg 12



Tuesday, 3 December 2019, 14:00-15:30

SARA BONFANTI (University of Trento)

“Brown struggles and hoary settlers: the fragmented chronicles of Panjabis in Southall”

The seminar revisits the nexus between ageing and mobility looking at an exemplary diaspora group. Considering Panjabis in West London, whose postcolonial settlement dates back to the Fifties, we will discuss facts and fictions of the demographic change since occurred in the borough of Southall, aka Little India. Reminiscent of Baumann’s ground-breaking work (1996), how to address today’s intersection of social diversification and ageing in a historical Black & Minority Ethnic district? The arguments put forward are based on two years’ ethnographic fieldwork in the area with British Asians, within a wider research focused on the re-production of ‘home’ away from the homeland. This speech critically compares the original narratives I collected from local elders in their everyday to the outputs of an oral history project led by a politically active cohort of pioneer migrants. While this recent heritage initiative popularised a redemptive image of ‘Panjabis of Southall’ (promoted by the Indian Workers’ Association and supported with national funds), non-aligned personal accounts seem to challenge such mainstream memorialisation. Visiting households and care residences, religious and community centres, the ‘struggles and achievements’ rendered by my elderly research participants oftentimes misalign with the official documentary movies released.

An intersectional approach to hushed stories of age and migration cracks open the celebrative saga of Asian Southallians (gendered, classed and racialized), while exposing the intentions that this compound generation holds for themselves and their families in later life. In depicting the past process of settlement, lived accounts from senior residents of this BME borough disclose the present experience of ageing at home and yet within and across global borders. The seminar pays homage to Brah’s legacy (1999), pluralizing the scents of memory recollected by an epic diaspora in Britain.



Sara Bonfanti is a social anthropologist, specialized in gender studies, with expertise on South Asian diasporas. She was awarded a PhD in Anthropology of Migrations for her multisite ethnography conducted between Italy and India, analyzing generational change among Punjabi transnational families. Keen on participatory methods, her interests include kinship, religious pluralism and media cultures, approached through intersectionality and life stories. Since 2017, Dr. Bonfanti has collaborated within the comparative ERC-HOMInG Project, which investigates the home-migration nexus across European cities. She has published widely in Italian and English, and her book “Shifting Roofs. Ethnographies of home and mobility in Europe” is forthcoming by Bloomsbury. With co-director Abbas Kazmi, she is currently engaged in the making of a documentary film “Of domes and robes. A trilogy on minority houses of worship”.



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