



Lecture Series in Social Anthropology

Full
Semester
2025

Tuesday 30 September 2025 | 4.15 p.m. | Room AND-4-06

Fashioning the ‘Cosmopolitan Diva’: Notes from a Contemporary Finishing School of Delhi

Dr. Suchismita Chattopadhyay (BML Munjal University)

In India, the economic reforms of 1991 led to the emergence of a consumption-driven economy and a booming service industry, producing new aspirations and sensibilities. Delhi’s new ‘world-class’ spaces of employment, pleasure and consumption demand new modes of belonging. At the level of the workforce in the service industry, belonging is mediated by proficiency in English and soft skills. Similarly, the clients also must demonstrate a knowledge of taste and distinction that goes beyond possessing the monetary means to consume. However, neither of these dispositions nor these skills are naturally given. Grooming institutions have emerged as sites that teach clients new lifestyle practices and how to be ‘professional’. This presentation is an ethnography of a finishing school in Delhi that trains upper-class women in body language, etiquette and lifestyle practices. Through its pedagogy and classes, I examine how the “cosmopolitan diva” is fashioned. This paper positions the women and their desires alongside the changing aesthetics of the city. I highlight pleasure and conspicuous spending, where etiquette by itself, through the lessons, become an aspirational and desirable phenomenon. Moreover, I also ground the finishing school as a space that consolidates class and caste identities.

Organization:

Department of Social Anthropology
and Cultural Studies (ISEK)
Social and Cultural Anthropology
Dr. Juliane Neuhaus
Andreasstrasse 15
8050 Zurich

Contact:

juliane.neuhaus@uzh.ch

Entrance free of charge.

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