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SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

IMPACT
STORY

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Our fourth Sustainability impact story highlights the research work of Dr. Divya Kannan.

Dr. Kannan is an Assistant Professor at the Department of History and Archaeology at Shiv Nadar University. Her vast array of research topics ranges from 19th and 20th South Asian history, History of Education, Childhood and Youth, Caste, Gender Studies, Social Movements, Empires and Colonial Violence, Christian missions, and Public and Oral Histories, to name a few.

Dr. Kannan and her team recently were among the Shiv Nadar Foundation Collaboration Grants 2023 winners. Their winning proposal is “Past as Present: Approaches to Pedagogy, History, Archeology in India.” Let’s hear about the project from Dr. Kannan.



Dr. Divya Kannan

Assistant Professor,
Department of History and Archaeology,
Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR

Today, we are in conversation with Dr. Divya Kannan as she talks about her work and her students’ exciting research projects. She shares how her teaching, research, collaborations, and students’ research are creating a difference and contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

? Recently, you edited a book on *Childhood and Youth in India: Engagements with Modernity*. Over the years, how has the lens of your research questions moved around the History of Education, Childhood and Youth, Caste, Gender Studies, Social Movements, and Public and Oral Histories, to name a few? What has inspired your research and teaching?

I will take the example of Childhood and Youth studies. Until a few decades ago, psychologists, biologists, and neurologists dominated the field. However, there is now a recognition that wider inequalities across regions and temporal scales affect children’s lives diversely. There has also been the need to scrutinize the Euro-American-centric social constructions of childhood and adolescence and their embedding in longer histories worldwide, such as colonialism. These have implications for children’s agency and political participation, as evident in the rising mobilizations on climate change issues. I was encouraged to explore this field, which is relatively new in South Asia, through my earlier research on the history of education. I have also been part of several NGOs since my college days centered around similar concerns, but my new research forays have enabled me to gain a more nuanced perspective on educational systems, political conflicts, and the role of culture.



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? A lot of your work, in many ways, reflects on one or more Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 4, Quality Education; Goal 5, Gender Equality; and Goal 10, Reduced inequalities. Please describe how your work in general, and particularly in 2023, is around sustainability.

In 2023, I embarked on slightly different but interrelated projects. Currently, I am exploring the history of women and cycling in twentieth-century India to understand how gender relations affect travel mobility and public and urban participation. I am continuing my earlier research through a long-term project examining the links between child welfare and international humanitarianism in post-independent India. In particular, I am interested in understanding how the field of social work evolved, the role played by women's voluntary agencies in promoting child welfare and development, and the complexities therein. I would like to assert that although these research themes may not speak directly to certain understandings of sustainability, they point to a fundamental concern - issues of justice and equality across historical contexts. Without addressing social and environmental inequalities from various disciplinary perspectives, policy and research agendas on sustainability will remain incomplete and inadequate.



Recently, you concluded an interesting collaborative project on 'Gender Equality in Higher Education in India' with Savitribhai Phule University, Pune, and Brunel University, London. Please share some interesting outcomes from the project that you could implement in your teaching and research.

Along with my colleague, Dr Sruthi Muraleedharan from the Department of IRGS, I participated as a resource coordinator for SNU for this international project from 2020-2022. We were the only private university in India as a case study for this critical study. Despite the rapidly changing landscape of higher education that aims to expand educational opportunities, some findings echoed older concerns. This includes the lack of representation of young women in STEM, the difficulties of navigating new spaces for first-generation learners, the laxity of mechanisms to address sexual harassment, and gender gaps in the classroom. As part of the Action-Oriented phase at Shiv Nadar, we awarded small grants to four teams consisting of undergraduate students to carry out a project on gender issues affecting our campus. This resulted in exciting case reports on mental health, sexual harassment, and the challenges faced by disprivileged students, and one of the teams also generated a conversation on campus spaces through an interactive exhibition. We also hosted a film festival to reach out to more students on campus. The project has enabled us to incorporate some of these concerns at a conceptual level in our respective disciplinary courses on gender and feminism and provoke conversations among stakeholders who have hitherto not taken some of the issues seriously.

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**What are some of your students' key research projects (Ph.D./ OUR/ conferences, etc.)?
How do you think your work is creating a long-term impact on sustainability?**

Currently, my PhD student, Meera Panicker, is pursuing her research on the history of sanitation labour, caste, and urban space in the Bombay Presidency. Though rooted in modern South Asian history, this work also draws from critical geography and anthropology and has implications for debates on urban waste, sanitation, and campaigns for social justice. OUR projects have also raised interesting questions. Our alumni, Srabondeya Haldar (whom I co-supervised with Dr Iman Mitra), worked on the politics of newspapers and the reportage of the events of 1857, Gaurangi Malaviya on law and obscenity regulations, and our soon-to-graduate student, Saumya Saini, examined the creation of the Partition Museum in Amritsar. Other ongoing OUR projects include a study of women artists as cultural diplomats in post-independent India; another revisits the debate on prostitution and childhood in colonial India and the legal discourses surrounding it. In the final year of BA thesis work, students are exploring themes such as language politics, Partition cinema, adoption laws, and dance histories.

My work attempts to be in conversation with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that work directly on issues of sustainability and inclusive development. For instance, my research examines issues such as inequality, mobility, poverty, and education, allowing stakeholders to develop a long-term durée approach to understanding contemporary issues. Developing synergies between science and society is also significant; I hope my research contributes to this endeavor. For instance, one of my current research projects looks at the history of women and cycling in twentieth-century India to ask broader questions regarding the right to travel mobility and participation in public spaces.

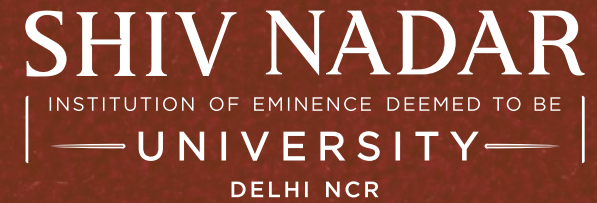


What are some of the partnerships and collaborations you have been able to nurture with not-for-profit, industry, or academia?

Since April 2020, I have been the co-convenor of the online forum Critical Childhood and Youth Studies Collective (CCYSC), which I co-founded with Dr Anandini Dar at BMU Munjal. We wanted to create a platform for academics and practitioners working on and with childhood and youth in South Asia. The CCYSC publishes reading resources and podcasts and encourages student internships to bring together various interdisciplinary perspectives.

I am also part of an initiative to promote humanities research and training in my home state of Kerala, and I have been part of a group named ISHORE. This academic group hosts workshops and research initiatives for college students in Kerala who lack the necessary tools and opportunities to pursue their research, primarily in the fields of History, Sociology, and Anthropology. Since 2022, I have also been a member of the Critical Child Rights Network, a group for childhood and youth studies scholars working in the field, led by scholars at the University of Bristol and Liverpool.

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Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence is fully committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We have embraced a four-pronged strategy for SDGs through **teaching, research, our core institutional practices, and partnerships.**

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