

# Strategies for Survival and Resources for Resistance

Sudeeti Geeta Mantraraj

The vocation of cultural studies has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance.<sup>1</sup>

## I Introduction

As I was writing the first draft of this essay in the last months of 2021, India was on the verge of its third major wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. This would mean another long spell of uncertainty, the most brutal outcome being a shutdown of economic activity, particularly for India's vast informal sector. Before sitting down to write, I bought a cup of *chai* from the small university canteen. The owner told me, "If there is another lockdown, the poor can survive one week, maybe fifteen days, but after that one does not know. People do not have any money left now, hell, even I do not have any money left."

What is the relevance of this anecdote in a reflection on cultural studies? The essay which follows is an attempt at responding to this question, which might be more pointedly reformulated as follows: How do the theories of cultural studies connect to lived realities in India? This is perhaps a compulsive pathological trait that accompanies intellectual work in India, and a line of thinking that bears the mark of the tradition of postcolonial studies: We are driven to thinking comparatively at almost all times, always referring back to our own national situation, our own particular national anxieties. Yet the project of cultural studies seems like the appropriate space to raise such questions, due to its own anti-disciplinary, open, and overtly political pasts.

That cultural studies, as an intellectual and engaged critical project, emerged in a specific historical scenario and responded to particular national situations, is fairly clear. One could easily use its British and subsequently American heritage to delineate how cultural studies frameworks cannot be used for postcolonial countries like India. Its rise as a kind of anthropology of the centre, for urbanized, industrialized societies utilising mass communication techniques, is another factor which makes cultural studies difficult to translate into the Indian context. Urbanity and industri-

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities," *October* 53 (1990), 22.

alization have, of course, existed for a long time, but its breaks and continuities with rural India are less clear. Britain has not been a dominantly agrarian society for at least a century, whereas at least half of India's population still depends on agriculture. Yet, a listing of differences is a trivial affair which leads us down futile paths. These differences should not result in a wholesale rejection of the tradition of inquiry that cultural studies represents. On the other hand, we should, like all great artists, steal what we like from tradition.

Thinking and writing about cultural studies and determining what can be productively stolen from its frameworks has also involved reassessing my own assumptions. Rereading the initial statement of purpose I submitted to participate in the seminar "Cultural Studies Around the World," in which this essay developed, I am struck by how differently I think of the field after an extended engagement with a range of its foundational texts. Before I engaged with the texts we collectively studied, I felt that the field was somewhat outdated, an interesting token of the past. But now I feel quite differently. With its vast variety of differing tools and concerns, centred around the interaction between political economy and cultural-ideological life, it feels like it is not cultural studies that is outdated, but that instead it is we who have lost the sophisticated tools of cultural studies.

Therefore, I do not think that the task is to go *beyond* cultural studies, but rather to urgently identify what within cultural studies is useful to us today. I argue that what we should steal from cultural studies has its roots in the foundational moments of the field, and not so much in its postmodern wanderings (however interesting and important they might be) into the study of multiple identities, marginal groups, or, in Lata Mani's words, "the new politics of difference – racial, sexual, cultural, transnational."<sup>2</sup> These foundational gestures in the works of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall open up two major aspects which, I believe, have a contemporary relevance that transcends whichever national paradigms we exist in. The first is cultural studies' dual intellectual and political lineage due to which Hall has even called the project of cultural studies "politics by other means."<sup>3</sup> The background in Marxism and New Left political traditions, and their explicit concern with examining everyday working-class life and consciousness, should be a pillar which continues to centre any future cultural studies programme. Its location in the tension between the inside and outside of the academy, with its concerns grounded in the working class, particularly in the synthesis of working-class culture with progressive intellectual traditions in the West, is by no means a finished, outdated, or useless project. The synthesis of these two strands – however differently the working class is configured in India and however more sensitive we have to be to the ways in which intellectual traditions of the West are used in India – remains important, if not necessarily in a complete translation and substitution of paradigms, then at least in the spirit of the work.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lata Mani, "Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 392.

<sup>3</sup> Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies," 12.

The second aspect of cultural studies which has lasting importance lies in its intellectual framework. What is evident in reading texts from foundational figures in British cultural studies such as Hall to thinkers who can be connected with the field's further development beyond a narrower British context – such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, and Paul Gilroy – is the foregrounding of the category of political economy within the realm of culture. Cultural studies gains a disciplinary identity perhaps most keenly when it positions itself as the site of examining the determinations between cultural-symbolic forms and economic-power relations. If *determination* seems too strong a word, reminiscent of a deterministic reading of Marxism where the cultural moment is reduced to the economic structure, the term *mediation* may be more useful. The project of cultural studies is unique in its making explicit of the problematic of the relationship between the base and the superstructure.

While Fredric Jameson was one of the most cutting critics of cultural studies as embraced by North American academia in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>4</sup> his refinement of the Althusserian framework of mediation is a major theoretical contribution from which cultural studies as a project grounded in, but moving beyond, classical Marxism, can profit.<sup>5</sup> To schematically summarise, the relations between symbolic activity and economic activity are not to be understood in a mechanical cause-and-effect relation. Nor is the framework to be of an essence or an epiphenomenon whose ultimate meaning lies in economic activity. Mediation, or the relation between different levels in the structural world (such as politics, culture, law, economics, and art), asserts only that there is reciprocal influence. Simply put, there is no autonomous domain of human life. This may sound like a paradox, but what cultural studies can do most effectively is to creatively explore this lack of autonomy of cultural life. The Barbie doll, to take an example explored in depth by Grewal in a central chapter of her book *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (2005), does not merely function to create global images of beauty rooted in Western stereotypes, manifesting as a symbolic representation of Western cultural hegemony. The Barbie doll was also a unique commodity, entering the specificities of class society in India, and had to adapt not only to cultural norms, but also market formations and class identities. Grewal writes about how Barbie became “an embodiment of the Indian state’s policy of economic liberalization and its need for foreign investment,” while also being a good that had to be “transcoded” and localized in the particular class and gender dynamics within the nation for it to truly become a meaningful object of desire.<sup>6</sup>

These two aspects of cultural studies, the former as “politics by other means” and the latter as a sophisticated form of theoretical inquiry, prompt us to think of another agent of intellectual activity, i.e., the thinker. The academic, sequestered in an ivory tower, away from the strife of the world, pouring over some ancient

---

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, “On ‘Cultural Studies,’” *Social Text* 34 (1993): 17–52.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 1–60.

<sup>6</sup> Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 82.

manuscript, is one traditional representation of a thinking subject. The other is that of a public intellectual, who utilises the wisdom of learning and scholarship as a responsible actor in worldly affairs. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler elaborate further on this essential link between cultural studies and the “real world” in the introduction to their 1992 collection *Cultural Studies*:

Intellectual work is, by itself, incomplete unless it enters back into the world of cultural and political power and struggle, unless it responds to the challenges of history. Cultural studies, then, is always partly driven by the political demands of its context and the exigencies of its institutional situation; critical practice is not only determined by, it is responsible to, its situation.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the figure of the committed public intellectual is a fading figure, a remnant of the twentieth century. Yet, cultural studies heeds this call most overtly and unabashedly: In that as long as there are crises, we will need strategies for survival and resources for resistance. And even if we do not have figures on which to project our desires, we still maintain the responsibility of continually responding to the world. Hall admits the lack candidly:

We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference; organic intellectuals with a nostalgia or will or hope (to use Gramsci’s phrase from another context) that at some point we would be prepared in intellectual work for that kind of relationship, if such a conjuncture ever appeared.<sup>8</sup>

The moment of decision is also the moment of anxiety. We decide to conserve these two aspects of cultural studies (leftist political engagement and Marxist theory) not because these are the essential aspects of a complex tradition, but because we have chosen to do so. In making this decision, we also risk the exclusion of many other aspects associated with cultural studies: the study of identity formation, for example, or racism, or gender studies. Does such a selection of elements not impoverish cultural studies, which fashions itself as a welcoming space for all sorts of new social movements and marginalized identities? This question should be foregrounded and maintained, even if it is outside the objective of this essay to answer it.

## II Cultural Studies in Whose India?

When I joined the seminar, I was interested in the question of cultural studies in India. There are very few institutes and universities in the country teaching cultural studies proper. At best it will be a module within a media studies or journalism

---

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1999), 102.

course. Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, and Maitrayee Chaudhuri are considered historians, literary critics, and feminist scholars respectively. There really do not exist, in the vein of Raymond Williams or Stuart Hall, people who represent “Indian cultural studies,” although a great deal of work is done which can easily be counted as cultural studies. There is a proliferation of work on marginalized identities, popular culture, and non-mainstream traditions. Yet this work has not been unified into any project of Indian cultural studies and usually remains within established disciplines such as political studies, history, or sociology.<sup>9</sup>

My thesis for the non-emergence of cultural studies as a separate field in India is that, whereas cultural studies began as a specific project to understand the national cultures of Britain (whether they be seen as counterhegemonic working-class cultures as Williams does, or not), in India the question of nationality is much more fraught. What was the basis of the demand for the nation in India, one which substantively could imagine a nation as opposed to merely a negative definition postulated in opposition to British colonialism? Indeed, many have argued that India is a multi-national country – with twenty-two official languages (not to mention more than 19,500 spoken languages), multiple religious tendencies and vastly different cultural manifestations. Consequently, even maintaining one dominant national culture is a deeply volatile and inevitably contested process.

A secular version of the narrative of Indian nationalism would claim that nationality was only based on residence within the geographic boundary of India and an acceptance of the democratic political system. A more critical view would characterise nationality as based on Hindu religious identity. After all, the country gained Independence only after dividing the subcontinent into majority Muslim and majority Hindu areas after a bloody Partition and a mass migration of people across the region. Indian cultural studies, to name a thing that does not really exist, lacks the grounding that the formation of cultural studies in Britain had in some conception of national culture, what was marginal to this culture, and what was oppositional to it.

Grewal’s framework of transnationality, highlighted in the case studies and larger argument of her study *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neo-liberalisms*, referenced in the previous section, seems useful beyond the fact that it helps in understanding how subjectivity is really produced through international and not solely local processes. Specifically, I think the framework can be employed not only to gain a better understanding of India’s diasporic relationships, but also the many shifting contours within India. In 2020, for instance, a massive mobilization of farmers agitating against the Indian government’s pro-corporate laws successfully forced the government to roll back this legislation. These farmers come from different states in India, speak different languages, belong to different religious groups, and have different forms of caste-based alliances. Many have family in

---

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009); Eleanor Zelliott, *Ambedkar’s World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013).

Canada and the United States, giving the agitation a decidedly global thrust.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the Indian government was extremely upset when global pop star Rihanna retweeted photos in support of the protesting farmers on Twitter. This was even seen as an international conspiracy to defame India.<sup>11</sup> A cultural studies framework strikes me as apt to describe and understand this movement. The rallying point of the movement has been the opening-up of agriculture to international markets and foreign capital, a move which is seen by the peasant unions as detrimental to the livelihood of farmers. Creating a framework which can integrate this basic insight of political economy, along with its relationship with factors such as gender, linguistic, religious, and caste identity, seems like a potentially relevant contribution through which cultural studies can provide insight into the many facets of the movement.

In my personal opinion, the transnationality emphasized in different ways by Spivak, Gilroy, and Grewal is an important theoretical tool that is not being focused on enough in India. Taking into account the global flows of capital into different regions of the country, its relationship with regional capital, which also travels all across the vast subcontinent, and its relationship with constituting and reconfiguring local cultures, religious communities, and caste identities, seems to constitute such a framework to me. Without a truly global perspective and without investigating the role of capital, India seems like an endlessly differentiated and endlessly varied space of multiple languages and multiple contending identities and practices.

Nationality, which is such a fraught topic in so many texts in cultural studies and is a central point of contention for many non-White or non-Western authors, remains a central issue in Indian culture today. Indeed, one of the major contemporary political discourses in the country is centred around a set of supposedly simple questions: Who is a true Indian? Who truly represents the nation? I do think cultural studies as a discipline has engaged systematically and sophisticatedly with this contested and relevant question and will continue to do so in the future.

Let me return to the original theme of the essay, finding strategies for survival and resources for resistance, in the spirit of cultural studies. While the current ruling political party in India strives to construct a monolithic imagination of the Indian nation and Indianness, imposing a national identity on the multiplicity of diverse cultural traditions of India, what could the purpose of cultural studies be in that context today? In a certain sense, oppositional intellectual activity is already in progress, even if it does not take the name of cultural studies. To give an example, the government banned the consumption of beef in several states of India and regularly calls for the arrest of citizens who are involved in the slaughter of cattle. This was mostly read as an attempt at forcing an upper-caste Brahmanical notion of dietary culture onto the people at large, along with restricting the Muslim and Dalit populations from consuming an affordable type of meat. Many scholars responded by

---

<sup>10</sup> Olivia Bowden, "Hundreds Rally Outside Indian Consulate in Solidarity with Protesting Farmers," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, 5 December 2020, web.

<sup>11</sup> Geeta Pandey, "Farmers' Protest: Why Did a Rihanna Tweet Prompt Indian Backlash?" *BBC News*, 4 February 2020, web.

demonstrating how, in different cultures, contexts, religious, and ethnic circumstances, people have consumed beef as a part of daily life in India.<sup>12</sup>

This is only one example, but the larger point is that, while cultural studies perhaps cannot be used to understand “the national culture of India,” or even the “national culture of India’s working class,” it can still serve as an important oppositional resource. When a particular power imposes a hegemonic understanding of, say, dietary practices, it is a knowledge of the ordinary, everyday habits of people that becomes an important tool to struggle against imposed dictates of what is “our tradition” and “our culture.” It may strike one as ironical, but in India cultural studies may be useful as a tool not to construct a unified or homogenous culture, but to gather intellectual resources to struggle against its imposition.

### III Retracing Origins

The questions I ask about our culture are questions about our general and common purposes, yet also questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.<sup>13</sup>

Cultural studies is often associated with the democratic gesture of enabling popular culture to enter into the halls of the academy, as opposed to the hierarchising distinction between “high” and “low culture.” Whereas “high culture” is associated with the study of canonical, classical texts chosen by authority, cultural studies enables the “low” to become a fully legitimate domain of inquiry. However, when we look at Raymond Williams’s text “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), which itself has become a classical and even canonical reference within cultural studies, there is a very distinct sense of culture which is perhaps lost in associating cultural studies solely with the popular (the non-academic, the non-classical, the non-elite).

I wish to take this moment to ponder upon the second way in which Williams thinks of the term culture in this essay. He writes “A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested.” For Williams, culture is both traditional and creative, both common and individual. It is “a whole way of life, the common meanings,” but also “the arts and learning – the special process of discovery and effort.”<sup>14</sup>

Williams does not exclude the study of the arts and learning from the domain of cultural studies; indeed, it is associated with what is creative in a particular society. “Common meanings” are associated with tradition, whereas “the arts and learning” are associated with discovery and effort. In differentiating between the two,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Dwijendra Narayan Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Williams emphatically does not degrade “high culture” and venerate the popular. What he does, instead, is to call for the democratization of both. In a touching way, Williams expresses how, for working people excluded from the ivory towers of supposedly proper learning, “the interest is there, the capacity is there.”<sup>15</sup> In his humanist best he writes: “An interest in learning or the arts is simple, pleasant, and natural. A desire to know what is best, and to do what is good, is the whole positive nature of man.”<sup>16</sup>

It is of course odd to hear this kind of discourse in our arguably post-humanist world, which has witnessed not only the death of God, but also the death of Man, and where any thinker claiming to determine an essential human nature is deemed, at best, to be naïve, or, at worst, a reactionary. Williams does two things in this passage: He argues that the arts and learning are not arbitrarily constructed bourgeois values assigned to particular texts, but that they possess a real value in national life. The second thing he does is speak a language of human potentiality. Those excluded from the institutions of learning, he argues, have the potential and innate ability to learn and access what is passed on in traditions of learning. While I reflect upon the many texts we read in the seminar, it is this element which I find only in Williams. His assertion of cultural value and human potentiality disrupts the classification of cultural studies as the study of practices excluded by traditional learning and classical disciplinary structures. Williams considers *both* to be ordinary – not high or low, but ordinary. That is: Shakespeare as well as youth culture and Barbies, Sanskrit plays as well soap operas. In a certain way, Williams delineates not a disciplinary object of inquiry, but an attitude towards culture, and specifically culture as a whole. The point is not to decide whether the framework is multi-disciplinary, post-disciplinary, or anti-disciplinary, or whether we are doing sociology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, or critical race theory. The more disruptive point is that this gaze is applied as much to traditional domains of learning as it is to non-traditional ones. While the institutionalization and categorization of disciplines may be perfectly content with allowing cultural studies to exist as a fringe, politically radical, and subversive department, a true cultural studies perspective, following Williams, leaves no domain untouched.

On another note, Williams's – and, before him, Hoggart's – rootedness in the concerns of the working class, adult education, and adult literacy programmes are also important points of origin, which have perhaps been lost in the vast, many-headed concerns of cultural studies. Williams maintains a perspective of humanism and human potentiality: The acquisition of culture is something that all human beings are capable of. Cultural studies is therefore not only a critical project of choosing different domains of analysis within certain “left” frameworks, but also a pedagogical project of sharing and teaching cultural resources within a nation to those previously excluded from elite institutions. This understanding of cultural studies as a pedagogical endeavour, along with maintaining a humanist perspec-

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 14.



tive of the innate potential of people to grasp, understand, learn, and enjoy “high” culture, is another aspect which remains an integral part of Williams’s project.

This question is also rooted within Williams’s articulation of the harnessing of a British national culture. Opposed to left traditions that follow a prescriptivist notion of how culture should be, what art people should create, and what traditions they should follow, Williams proposes an idea of openness and creativity: Culture can never be prescribed beforehand, but consists instead of the whole range of human meanings while relating to the world and each other. The project, therefore, is not only critical, but also constructive. Why is this relevant to us today? In India, for instance, there has been a highly successful cultural-political attempt at rewriting the ancient past, picking and choosing historical enemies, and building a universe of myth, symbols, and narrative in forging right-wing culture. Formations of identity, othering, a sense of Self, a sense of origin: All these are consciously produced through a variety of religious and cultural organizations.<sup>17</sup> Theirs is not a critical, but a constructivist project.

With such developments in mind, what I think that we should maintain from Williams is the necessity of a differently formulated and practiced constructive understanding of culture: one tied to notions of pedagogy, sharing, openness, and creativity. Too often the task of many left academics in universities is overly focused on critically deconstructing many cultural artefacts. When we discuss strategies for survival and resources for resistance, we require not only the important critical tool of analyses, but also the pedagogical and creative activity of creating, curating, and building culture.

How can this building up of culture occur without a directive element? Williams writes: “I saw the future and it didn’t work. [...] The Marxist interpretation of culture can never be accepted, while it retains, as it need not retain, this directive element, this insistence that if you honestly want socialism you must write, think, learn in certain prescribed ways.”<sup>18</sup> How does one maintain a constructive notion of culture without falling into prescriptive notions? I cannot help but think the answer lies somewhere close to what we do in universities.

## IV The Worldliness of Cultural Studies

In the violent histories of our nation-states, there comes a time when it feels as if the detour through theory to understand reality is futile. The immediate has a way of imprisoning us and absorbing us in patterns of shock and despair. In June of 2022 we witnessed frontal attacks on the Indian Muslim community that ranged from shooting into an open crowd to demolishing the homes of poor Muslims as well as

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Geeta Pandey, “Aurangzeb: Why is a Mughal Emperor Who Died 300 Years Ago Being Debated on Social Media?” *BBC*, 21 May 2022, web; Pavan Kulkarnai, “How Did Savarkar, a Staunch Supporter of British Colonialism, Come to Be Known as ‘Veer?’” *The Wire*, 18 May 2017, web.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, “Culture is Ordinary,” 15.

prominent Muslim activists. The shock of these events has reverberated throughout India, where it seems like we have run out of anger but not tears. It is in these moments more than anything else that we need strategies for survival and resources for resistance, and we need to traverse the detour of theory to begin to understand a reality which now expresses itself only in violence. We are not even properly able to name what is happening in India, and we use borrowed words: “apartheid,” or “genocide,” or “fascism,” while knowing that what is really happening inside our peculiar national prison is our unique curse, which requires a unique name of its own.

I think we must desperately grasp on to theoretical and political practices that can help us out of this mess and prevent our own minds from becoming numb or stupefied by current events. Perhaps our friends in Germany do not know this, but Germany’s Nazi past is one of the most frequently evoked political metaphors for where many fear we are headed in India. The work of cultural studies, critical theoretical work held in the same fist as engaged political work, becomes not just one more discipline offered in the academy, but a real resource to understand how to survive in a crumbling democracy.