

DOING CULTURAL STUDIES IN INDIA

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Practitioners and teachers of Cultural Studies, a discipline that thrives on its ability to ask questions about the taken-for-granted aspects of culture, are very often faced with difficult choices in a country like India. Because of the association of the word ‘culture’ with the Indian concept of *sanskriti* (closer to the notion of the civilisational culture of India), Cultural Studies very often runs counter to the ethos of Indian culture. We are talking of a culture where the measure of one’s *sanskriti* is in the respect that one displays towards elders and towards authority. To put things in perspective while we, as teachers of Cultural Studies teach our students to be critical of all the ideas and beliefs that appear to be natural but are culturally constructed, students are sometimes left confused by the demand on the part of society to force them to be respectful to conventional wisdom. Thus teaching of Cultural Studies in the Indian context evokes an entirely different set of ethical and epistemological concerns from the West. While this may be true to some extent in the case of all disciplines, which are believed to have their “origin” in the West, the problem is much graver in the context of Cultural Studies in India. Further, the influence of postmodern theories have posed another threat to the discipline of Cultural Studies in India (when, for instance, it is contended that all perspectives are true in their own contexts) as it clips the wings of the researcher who wants to critique the structures of social injustices or the exploitative structures of Indian society apart from critiquing the global structures of inequality. My argument in the paper would be that there is a need for the discipline to take account of these ethical and epistemological concerns in its pedagogy without being shorn of its essentially political project of looking at the reason behind the way things are in a culture to change things for the better. An obsession with celebration of difference can easily mask underlying material conditions. To cite an example, it is a fact that championing the cause of alternative “healing” practices (as Ashis Nandy does) in the name of celebration of difference has dangerous consequences in a country like India as pointed out by thinkers like Meera Nanda. Without asserting that these attitudes stem from the discipline itself, I will look at the ways in which they can have an impact on the teaching of Cultural Studies: thus, I contend that the epistemology has an impact on the pedagogy of the discipline. For an analysis of these issues, I plan to use media texts (including visual clips from the social media) which highlight instances of violence which are carried out in the name of protecting *sanskriti*. The paper will mainly take into account the existing literature on Cultural Studies in India. All through my paper will be informed by the perspective of a university teacher of Cultural Studies. My paper will take into account the profile of student population and highlight relevant classroom experiences of both colleagues and students along with my experiences of teaching MA students of Cultural Studies in India for more than five years.