



Mains Practice Question

Q. What is lifeboat ethics? Explain with examples. (150 Words)

05 May, 2022 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- Define the concept of lifeboat ethics
- Elucidate its rationale with examples from recent times
- Briefly identify its limitations
- Conclude with emphasis on collaboration amongst countries and how openness can benefit all countries

Answer:

Lifeboat Ethics is a metaphor for **resource distribution proposed** by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1974. Hardin lays out the **premise of how each nation is similar to a lifeboat with specific carrying capacity** and allowing more people onboard will saturate the capacity of the boat, and thus constraining the availability of resources for the original occupants of the boat.

Going by this analogy, developed or privileged countries tend to not offer aid to poor countries or accept migrants from these countries because they are not under any obligation to do so and it may also stress the resource availability for their own citizens.

In recent times, we have seen nativist, anti-migrant tendencies in developed countries. Distraught refugees from war torn countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen have been denied entry in many European countries. Even in India, despite having a long history of harbouring refugees, Rohingyas fleeing persecution were not wholeheartedly welcomed. Recently the United States came up with a restrictive immigration policy for banning entry of Central American people fleeing violence and poverty. All these actions may seem immoral if judged on principles of humanity, but looking from the perspective of lifeboat ethics, these acts seem to be completely justified.

Human advances in science, technology, economic growth and governance have failed to reach and improve the living conditions in all countries. A major share of the world's population continues to live in Failed States and underdeveloped countries- reeling under poverty, effects of rapid climate change and scourge of civil wars. These affected people require aid, donations and asylum. A practitioner of lifeboat ethics may argue that countries should only care for their own citizens and maximize their welfare, since resources are limited.

Such an argument is flawed on two grounds- **firstly, even though resources are limited but real problem lies in their uneven distribution. Secondly, a lot of predicament of aid and asylum seekers arises not from their own doings.** It was developed nations who exploited these countries through colonialism, intervened in internal affairs of their country for geopolitical interests and unleashed havoc of climate change by luxurious living.

Lifeboat ethics presumes Nation States as **impregnable entities**, insular to external changes. Although the world is divided into many countries but humanity unites us all. We all share global commons and

'poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere'. Countries of the world can not forsake their duty of helping each other. Helping refugees, when a country is fully endowed with plenty of resources, can be a tool for soft power projection, strengthening multiculturalism and nurturing immigrant talents for economic prosperity.

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