



Mains Practice Question

Q. Is ethical relativism a valid approach to governance in a multicultural society like India? Discuss its implications on policy formulation. (150 words)

26 Jun, 2025 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- Introduce the answer by briefing about Ethical Relativism
- Give Arguments in Favor of Validity of Ethical Relativism in India
- Highlight the Limitations of Ethical Relativism in the Context of India
- Conclude with a relevant quote

Introduction:

In a multicultural society like India, **ethical relativism—where moral standards are shaped by cultural contexts**—offers both opportunities and challenges for governance.

- While it allows for the accommodation of diverse cultural practices, it can also complicate the formulation of universal policies.
- For instance, the **debate over the Uniform Civil Code (UCC)** illustrates the tension between respecting cultural diversity and the need for a unified legal framework.

Body:

Arguments in Favor of Validity of Ethical Relativism in India:

- **Respect for Cultural Diversity:** Ethical relativism ensures that governance is sensitive to the cultural and religious practices of different communities.
 - By recognizing that morality varies across societies, policies can be tailored to respect diverse traditions.
 - The **Indian government's tolerant policy on religious attire** is an example where ethical relativism helps accommodate cultural diversity
- **Promotes Social Harmony** By allowing communities to retain their unique moral systems, ethical relativism can help preserve social harmony.
 - It prevents the imposition of a singular value system that may be perceived as oppressive by some groups.
 - **The reservation system in India** acknowledges the cultural and historical disadvantages faced by certain communities (**e.g., Scheduled Castes, Tribes, OBCs**), offering them affirmative action to level the playing field.
- **Flexibility in Policy Formulation:** Ethical relativism allows for more flexible policies that can adapt to the needs and values of diverse communities, **avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach**.
 - **PESA Act (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas)** allows local tribal self-governance, respecting the cultural ethos of tribal communities while enabling them to manage their affairs.
- **Recognition of Autonomy and Sovereignty of Communities:** Ethical relativism supports the

idea that each community has the right to determine its own moral standards and live by them without external interference.

- **Example: Religious freedom in India is enshrined in the Constitution (Article 25-28)**, which allows individuals and communities to practice their religion without government interference.
- **Encourages Tolerance and Coexistence:** Ethical relativism, when applied, encourages tolerance between different groups by recognizing that no one culture or belief system is inherently superior.
 - **Example:** The **communal harmony efforts** in India, such as **Interfaith Dialogue** and **Gandhi's philosophy of Ahimsa (non-violence)**, focus on understanding and tolerance between communities with varying ethical and religious beliefs.

Limitations of Ethical Relativism in the Context of India:

- **Undermines Universal Human Rights** Ethical relativism may clash with **universal human rights** when cultural practices violate basic freedoms or equality.
 - In the case of certain practices, such as **female genital mutilation (FGM)** or **child marriage**, policies rooted in cultural relativism could allow harmful traditions to persist, despite their violation of fundamental human rights.
- **Challenges in National Integration and Social Cohesion:** Ethical relativism might encourage **identity politics** and deepening social divisions, as it promotes policies based on the distinct needs of each group.
 - The growing demands for more reservations from various other communities, such as the Jat community in Haryana have led to tensions and protests
- **Erosion of Equality and Justice:** Ethical relativism can perpetuate **inequality** by allowing harmful practices to continue under the guise of cultural respect.
 - In cases where certain cultural practices discriminate against women, children, or marginalized groups, relativism might prevent meaningful reform, as it prioritizes cultural respect over justice and equality.
 - **Patriarchal practices** in certain communities still restrict women's rights, such as **limited access to education or work, due to deep cultural norms that relativism may inadvertently protect.**

Conclusion

As Gandhiji aptly said, "**A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people,**" highlighting the need to **respect cultural diversity while safeguarding universal human rights**. A balanced approach in governance is necessary, ensuring that policies uphold **both cultural identity and fundamental freedoms**. By following the ethical principles of **3Ps: Protection, Proportionality, and Participation**, India can achieve unity in diversity while promoting justice and equality.