Cultural Relativism in India: Through The Eyes of James Rachels

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Abstract: Culture is pivotal to the survival of the human race. But with each new step, a person can see the culture shift before their eyes. This paper examines the concept of cultural relativism as introduced by the philosopher James Rachels in the context of Indian society.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Relativism, Inclusivity, Moral Standard

1. INTRODUCTION

Mr. James Rachels who hailed from the United States, was an American philosopher who is highly renowned for possessing specializations in ethics and animal rights. He also authored the book, ‘The Elements of Modern Philosophy’ which deals with ethics. In one of the chapters of the book, Rachels talks about cultural relativism and the challenges beheld by the same.

Entitled as ‘The Challenge of Cultural Relativism’, James Rachels commences the piece with the example of two traditions: the Callatians and Greeks. While the tradition of the Callatians tied them to the practice of devouring the dead bodies of their deceased fathers, meanwhile the Greeks followed the tradition of burning them down to ashes. Both of the above traditions were drastically different and absurd to followers of the opposite traditions. When asked whether the two groups will carry out the opposite group’s tradition, horror flashed upon their faces. We need to understand why Rachels takes up this particular instance from ‘History’ written by Herodotus. The theme of ‘different cultures have different moral codes’ i.e. distinct cultures possess separate moral codes can be clearly deciphered in the above example of James Rachels. We can see how a particular action can be correct for one group but totally a horrendous thought for the other and vice-versa. However, to understand this trail of thought and its relevance in human life and ethics, we need to know what culture is, how one defines cultural relativism and what are the challenges associated with the same.

2. WHAT IS CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

Before delving into cultural relativism which is the main crux of this piece, we need to know what culture is. The webpage of LiveScience delineates culture to be the ‘characteristics’ of a community which accommodates numerous aspects such as language, food, customs and what not. Though the phrase ‘Vasudev Kutumbakam’ considers the world to be a family; however, no one culture is similar to the other. One can decipher the existence of numerous cultures even within a defined geographical location. Our country India is a real life example of the same. One can decipher a custom in wedding ceremonies in various parts of India in which the groom adorns the bride with vermillion; an important symbol for a woman which indicates her ‘suhaag’ or spouse. However in Assamese culture, the custom of adorning the bride with vermillion is done by the mother-in-law unlike the stated tradition. Though both the cultures trace their roots to the same land of India, however uniqueness is beheld by both of them. Throughout the pages of history, we have seen how polygamy was a common practice amidst the kings and even commoners. However, in many traditions polyandry was seen to be the so-called usual tradition and polygamy turned eyes towards it. In our very own Mahabharata, we can decipher how the kings took so many wives to themselves and didn’t face any social revolt. However, when Draupadi had to marry all the five Pandavas, it was an issue of great concern just because it was unacceptable according to the norms of the society that the epic was based on. In both of these examples we see how one practice might be a nightmare for the other if asked to swap. This brings us to the term ‘cultural relativism’.

Cultural Relativism has been defined by the webpage of Lumen Learning as the ‘ability’ with the help of which an individual tries to understand a culture through the eyes of its followers and refrain from judging it in comparison with their own culture and traditional norms. James Rachels illustrates the aspect of cultural relativism by first bringing in the claims of cultural relativists. The cultural relativists claimed that separate societies had separate moral codes. These moral codes form the basis of what is right and what is wrong in that particular society; if an action confirms with the beliefs of the group, then it is correct whereas if it is against the stated moral codes, then it is stated to be wrong. The absence of an objective standard moral code for the cultures to be judged is deciphered. No one culture is attributed a
special; each of them are given equal significance. It is asserted by the cultural relativists that no ‘universal truth’ exists in ethics because not all share a unanimous decision in accepting these truths. The virtue of tolerance must be cultivated to accommodate the numerous cultures brimming around us.

3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARGUMENT
This is where James Rachels brings in the ‘Cultural Differences Argument’. He argues that it is unacceptable to believe the absence of universal truth as claimed by the cultural relativists. Rachels inferred that it is obstructive to give in the absence of an objective moral code by using the reasoning of disagreement among communities on which actions are moral and which are not. The issue of being blinded by misconception is possible in such a scenario. The essence of deductive logic is somewhat missing in the cultural differences argument. James Rachels puts it in the following words: “The premise concerns what people believe- in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe differently. The conclusion, however, concerns what really is the case. The trouble is that this sort of conclusion does not follow logically from this sort of premise.” If we look at the above perspective from James Rachels’ eyes, we can decipher the simple reasoning that made him question the cultural relativists. Just because the Assamese society believes that it is correct for the mother-in-law putting vermillion over the bride’s temple; the other cultures where grooms do the action don’t consider it to be wrong. James Rachels brings it to our notice that it is unacceptable to arrive at a precise conclusion about morality just because not all individuals might agree on it.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ARGUMENT
Rachels further goes on to illustrate the consequences of cultural relativism that acts as a backing to provide support to his claim that there are flaws within the cultural differences argument. He puts forward the following consequences that cultural relativism beheld. He asserts that the disagreements on the superiority of cultures that we often witness in our daily lives will become unsuitable. The virtue of inclusivity must be developed whereas we bear the existence of ‘different’ societies as they are instead of terming theirs to be ‘inferior’ in comparison to our own culture. He brings in another consequence where he delineates the aspect of introducing a bar of morality to consider the actions of other societies as right or wrong. This possesses an issue within itself because this very bar of morality will make us feel that the culture of other societies are unsound. Cultural relativism here brings in the twist that we are not supposed to denounced the same. The other consequence that Rachels talks about in his piece is that the embracing of cultural relativism leads us to examine the development of morality or ‘moral progress.’ This declaration by Rachels is further illustrated by him with the example of the liberty attributed to women in recent times as compared to the decades of suppression and chained minds. However, if we view this scenario from the aspect of cultural relativism, an air of dilemma would hover around us whether the new found freedom by women is acceptable in comparison to the previous eras of subduing.

We need to acknowledge the fact that Rachels has provided us a wholesome piece which refrains from looking at cultural relativism only from one pair of eyes. He goes to provide the readers with two important lessons that cultural relativism aims to highlight in its due course. The first instance is that cultural relativism enlightens us on the fact our fondness or dislike is not established on the pedestal of some “absolute rational standard” as quoted by James Rachels. The assertion made by him is undeniable as we, as individuals, often tend to judge the social set up of various communities based on the so-called typical standards and norms of the society we live in. The second teaching that Rachels puts forward is that we need to give birth to an open mind. If we do not develop the attributes of inclusivity and tolerance in such diversified customs, we tend to judge or criticise the customs of those traditions or actions that have been kept aloof from us. Here James Rachels quotes from Herodotus and it goes like: “For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amidst all the nations of the world, the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best”. Through the usage of this quote, we can see how Rachels tries to bring the cons in the inherited notions that we are born with. The action of considering something to be right or wrong usually goes on to be based on the norms that our own culture taught us. Beliefs have a deep rooted impact on our thinking and it’s a Herculean task to modify them. We often see how North-Easterners are often targeted for their unalike culture in the mainland of India. These targets go on to become stereotypes which leave a deep cut on their minds. Hence, possessing an open and inclusive mind is the need of the hour.

While explaining the differences in the moral conduct of various societies, James Rachels sights the example of infanticide in the Eskimo culture. He delves into the minds of the Eskimos to know why they perform an action which receives backlashes from the entire community of humans. The arguments given in favour conclude that women who are capable of enjoying the pleasures of intercourse will be severely attached to the same; which might result in unwanted conceiving. It was also argued that women will be indulged more in sexual activity and thus, neglect her duties towards her husband and children. The narration of their stances on infanticide have been so meticulously articulated by Rachels that it does not form any negative thought in the mind of readers regarding the Eskimos. The
importance of examples can be clearly known from Rachels’ piece as it helps substantiate his arguments and makes it more crystal clear to the reader.

5. CRITIQUES & CONCLUSION

James Rachels’ piece on cultural relativism is a detailed analysis and provides us with a thorough understanding of what cultural relativism is. He doesn’t step back from delving into the cons of cultural relativism that the relativists usually tend to turn a blind eye to. One cannot undermine the knowledge that Rachels possesses about cultural relativism which is clear from his piece and substantive examples that can be seen with the arguments. However, the world is not perfect and so is not this piece. We can decipher James Rachels propagating the notion of the existence of an “objective moral standard” from time to time. Then, how should individuals contemplate the comprehension of universal ethics in the lieu of such diverse cultures? An alternate method is required apart from cultural relativism. Also, while we encourage the uniqueness beheld by each culture, how are we supposed to justify the acts that are morally condemning such as female genital mutilation? Though James Rachels gives an insight into how the above practice is done by keeping in mind the benefits for the society, what about the inhuman procedure being meted out to the women? There exists numerous other actions that are causing not only harm but are also resulting in the death of individuals. However, they are still being done with the purpose of benefiting the society. In such cases, does the notion of individual harm possess lesser significance as compared to the good of the society? Does the good of the society mean that individuals should neglect their desires and needs? If actions that are being done for the betterment of the society have greater value than the lives of the individuals, does it mean that the existence of an individual’s will has no place in the social structure? If the will is greater than the betterment of the society, does it mean that the culture of the society will perish in the due course? Also, while analysing Rachels piece on cultural relativism, another thought occurred to me related to the existence of cultures amongst various groups of people. Eskimos are comparatively known to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. We know for a fact that a lot of secret societies do exist even now. Is it justified to go and try to bring these societies into the limelight? Doesn’t their willingness count as an ethical question as well? Is it ethical to bring them into focus without their permission just for the knowledge of the rest of the world? Does the willingness of the group possess lesser significance? I am aware of the fact that these questions are not interrelated to the topic that James Rachels delves upon. However, as per my limited understanding they are ethical questions in nature and require colloquy on the same.

REFERENCES: