

Quadrant II – Notes

Programme: Bachelor of Arts (Second Year)

Subject: Political Science

Paper Code: POG107

Paper Title: Introduction To Human Rights

Unit: I

Module Name: Universalism and Cultural Relativism

Module No: 03

Name of the Presenter: Sonia Xavier

One of the important controversial issues of the day has been the conflict between two ideologies of Human Rights:

- Universalism,
- Cultural Relativism.

Universalism of Human Rights - The concept of Universalism of Human Rights holds that each human being possesses certain inalienable rights simply because he or she is a human. It is claimed that this right is universal irrespective of one's national background, religious or political views, gender or age.

The idea of Universality of Human Rights arose in the aftermath of the Second World War. An effort was made to create universal standards and values of human rights. The idea of universalism is based on the fundamental respect and dignity for all human beings.

The Universal standards and values were mainly based on the prospect of the Western countries. They included rights like individual liberty, democracy and political rights, social and economic rights etc. Although human rights are seen as universal, their applicability across the globe vary with the cultural context. For example, the right to freedom of speech might be regarded as a universal right and provides for the basis of a political system, but in some cultural traditions it is relatively unimportant.

Cultural Relativism of Human Rights - The concept of Cultural Relativism is a challenge to Universalism. The Cultural Relativist argue that human rights should not and cannot be universally applicable. What the West may consider as universal norms in human rights are inappropriate and may not be applicable in other cultures. It holds that the meaning of a right changes from context to context, and culture to culture.

Applying human rights universally, without considering specific cultures, clashes with a nation's cultural identity. This in turn is a human rights violation in itself.

The Culture relativists claim that there are differences in human rights in every society's perspective. Therefore they assert that each country should devise and implement their own notion of human rights based on their culture. It has been argued that certain rights eg. the rights to marriage and religious freedoms are directly contradictory to the customs in many non-Western societies.

Therefore, Human rights can not be universally applicable. They consider that employing universality of rights is a form of cultural imperialism. They refer to it as Western Imperialism. This idea of Western imperialism has often been driven forward by leaders in Asian, Islamic, and African countries.

Conclusion: The question of whether human rights are universal or culturally relative continues to be a major subject of debate among policymakers and intellectuals. While human rights are universally acknowledged by almost every modern state, the impact of these rights and their application is relative. It differs from one country to another.