

## RISK SOCIETY AND CULTURAL ANXIETY IN LATE MODERNITY- A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Bhagya.Y.K**

Associate Professor

Dept of Sociology Govt First Grade College Bannur Mysore(D)

---

### ABSTRACT

The concept of risk society was developed by Ulrich Beck to describe a stage of modernity where societies are increasingly preoccupied with managing risks created by their own development. Unlike traditional societies that dealt with natural dangers, late modern societies face manufactured risks arising from science, technology and industrialization. This shift produces widespread cultural anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity shaping how individuals perceive that future and organize their lives.

**Keywords:** cultural anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, modernity, risk society, knowledge.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sociology is largely seen as an outcome of modernism emerged out of modernist philosophy and thinking. It took a proper disciplinary shape in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Forerunners of sociology discipline such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were engaged in analyzing the social changes that occurred in the modern period. As a modernist project, it was committed to the idea that it was possible to produce reliable knowledge about society that human beings could use to shape their futures for the better.

In common understanding, modern" means contemporary or newest. For sociologists, it is the advent of enlightenment philosophy or enlightenment movement clubbed with industrial revolution and scientific progress where reason and rationality became the buzzword. Modernist thinkers emphasised that this modernism emerged in Western Europe and others followed it, though this view is contested by many social thinkers. Along with the modernist idea, science and technology developed in an unpredictable way. People started questioning the religious institutions. Most people started governing themselves in tune with the modernist ideology where they thought they have control over their own life. Along with the advent of modernization process, society changed drastically mostly in the western part of the world. It had both advantages and disadvantages.

The industrialization brought about development along with other forms of hazards and risks. Often in common parlance risk is defined as potential exposure to a given danger or hazard in terms of health and wealth. It is also sometimes regarded as anticipating uncertainty and it is mostly subjective in nature. In present times risk has taken a prominent place in the discourse of welfare for human beings. Mostly it is used in the context of health and wealth. In earlier days the risk was attributed to fate, luck, nature"s fury and to some other types of supernatural powers. However, because of the Enlightenment and modernity, reason and logic became important tool for analyzing social processes. They tried to find out causal relationship between all types of phenomena.

Risk became a matter of scientific prediction rather than explanation on the basis of supernatural powers. In recent times risk can be anticipated from not only hazardous industries, but also from a kind of lifestyle where we use too much of electronic devices from cooking instruments to use of mobile phones. Risk is also attached to the wellness and illness

behaviour. After the prominence of AIDS and other types of fatal diseases, health is also exposed to risks.

## 2. RISK SOCIETY

Risk society is the manner in which modern society organizes in response to risk. The term is closely associated with several key writers on modernity, in particular Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. The term was coined in the 1980s and its popularity during the 1990s was both as a consequence of its links to trends in thinking about wider modernity, and also to its links to popular discourse, in particular the growing environmental concerns during the period.

According to the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, a risk society is "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk", whilst the German sociologist Ulrich Beck defines it as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself".

### 2.1 Characteristics of risk society

In a **Risk Society**, the primary organizing principle of social life shifts from the distribution of wealth to the **distribution and management of risks** produced by modernization.

The key characteristics identified by sociologists like **Ulrich Beck** and **Anthony Giddens** include:

#### 2.1.1 Manufactured Uncertainty

**Human-Made Origins:** Unlike traditional natural hazards (acts of God), modern risks are **manufactured**—they are unintended by-products of human decisions, industrial progress, and scientific advancement (e.g., nuclear power, chemical pollution, AI).

**Invisibility:** Many modern risks are invisible to the human senses (like radiation or toxins) and require scientific expertise to detect, yet this same science is often the source of the risk.

#### 2.1.2 Global and Transboundary Scale

- **De-localization:** Modern risks are no longer confined by national borders. Hazards like climate change or financial crises affect everyone regardless of location or social class.
- **Irreversibility:** These risks often cause catastrophic, irreversible damage that traditional mechanisms like private insurance cannot compensate for.

#### 2.2.3 Individualization

- **Biographical Responsibility:** Traditional support structures (class, family, church) weaken, forcing individuals to manage systemic risks on their own. People must "create their own biography" and navigate constant choices about health, identity, and employment.
- **Shifting Burden:** Risks previously managed by the state (like long-term unemployment) are increasingly recodified as personal failures or individual responsibilities.

#### 2.2.4 Reflexive Modernization

- **Self-Critical Society:** Modernity becomes "reflexive" by turning back on itself. Society begins to question the foundations of progress and the very institutions (science, government) meant to provide safety.

- **Crisis of Trust:** There is a growing loss of faith in "experts" because scientific consensus often erodes, and institutions are seen as participating in "organized irresponsibility" by downplaying the risks they created.

### 2.2.5 Cultural Anxiety

- **The "I Am Afraid" Slogan:** In industrial society, the driving force was overcoming scarcity ("I am hungry"). In a risk society, the central motive becomes a **quest for safety** and the management of pervasive anxiety ("I am afraid").
- **Anticipation as Reality:** Risk is defined by the **anticipation of catastrophe**. Even if a disaster has not happened, the constant threat and media-driven awareness of potential hazards shape daily behavior and political policy.

## 3. KNOWLEDGE AND RISK SOCIETY

Both Beck and Giddens have strongly pointed out the role of knowledge in the risk society. How information and knowledge can put us away from the risk. Deborah Lupton in her book, *Risk* categorizes risk society into the following theoretical categories. These are **cognitive, socio-cultural, social constructionist theories** on risk.

### 3.1 Cognitive Science Perspective

Deborah Lupton holds the view that the cognitive science perspective is a kind of techno-scientific approach to risk, emerging from fields as engineering, statistics, and psychology and so on to calculate the probability of danger or hazard. She remarks that risks, according to this model, are preexisting in nature and in principle are able to be identified through scientific measurement and calculation and controlled using this knowledge. The cognitive science approach takes individuals as emotion-free actors, in a way which is similar to economic rational actors who pursue private interests more passionately.

### 3.2 Socio-Cultural Perspectives

Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens' idea of „risk society“ can come under this category of risk. Sociologists like Beck and Giddens have adopted a macro perspective. They link the idea of risk society to the process of modernization and characterize it as an outcome of modernity. Lupton also includes the „governmentality“ scholars in this perspective who have taken up Foucault's insights on governmentality to explore risk in the context of regulation and disciplining the mass populations. Risk could be viewed differently by differently people depending on their position in respective social groups. Risk has become an important and prevalent idea in the human civilization over last two centuries. With the modern technology and rational action, it is believed that risk can be controlled and regulated by the human beings.

### 3.3 Social Constructionist Perspectives

In the social constructionist perspective, risk is analyzed on the basis of the perception and response through social, cultural and political processes. Danger, hazard and risk all these concepts might change over a period of time according to the context and people's perception on the same. It is difficult to establish an objective or standard parameters for danger or hazard. To define the object of risk, it is often contested. In a particular context a risk is defined through a discourse.

## 4. MODERNITY AND REALISM IN SCIENCE

Beck and Giddens both approach the risk society firmly from the perspective of modernity, "a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. ... Modernity is vastly more

dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society ... which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than the past." They also draw heavily on the concept of reflexivity, the idea that as a society examines itself, it in turn changes itself in the process. In classical industrial society, the modernist view is based on assumption of realism in science creating a system in which scientists work in an exclusive, inaccessible environment of modern period.

### **Beck defined modernization as,**

Surges of technological rationalization and changes in work and organization, but beyond that includes much more: the change in societal characteristics and normal biographies, changes in lifestyle and forms of love, change in the structures of power and influence, in the forms of political repression and participation, in views of reality and in the norms of knowledge. In social science's understanding of modernity, the plough, the steam locomotive and the microchip are visible indicators of a much deeper process, which comprises and reshapes the entire social structure.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Environmental risks**

In 1986, right after the Chernobyl disaster, Ulrich Beck, a sociology professor at LMU Munich, published the original German text, *Risikogesellschaft*, of his highly influential and catalytic work (Suhkamp, Frankfurt 1986). *Risikogesellschaft* was published in English as *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* in 1992. The ecological crisis is central to this social analysis of the contemporary period. Beck argued that environmental risks had become the predominant product, not just an unpleasant, manageable side-effect, of industrial society.

Giddens and Beck argued that whilst humans have always been subjected to a level of risk – such as natural disasters – these have usually been perceived as produced by non-human forces. Modern societies, however, are exposed to risks such as pollution, newly discovered illnesses, crime, that are the result of the modernization process itself. Giddens defines these two types of risks as external risks and manufactured risks. Manufactured risks are marked by a high level of human agency involved in both producing, and mitigating such risks.

As manufactured risks are the product of human activity, authors like Giddens and Beck argue that it is possible for societies to assess the level of risk that is being produced, or that is about to be produced. This sort of reflexive introspection can in turn alter the planned activities themselves. As an example, due to disasters such as Chernobyl and the Love Canal Crisis, public faith in the modern project has declined leaving public distrust in industry, government and experts.

Social concerns led to increased regulation of the nuclear power industry and to the abandonment of some expansion plans, altering the course of modernization itself. This increased critique of modern industrial practices is said to have resulted in a state of reflexive modernization, illustrated by concepts such as sustainability and the precautionary principle that focus on preventive measures to decrease levels of risk.

There are differing opinions as to how the concept of a risk society interacts with social hierarchies and class distinctions. Most agree that social relations have altered with the introduction of manufactured risks and reflexive modernization. Risks, much like wealth, are distributed unevenly in a population and will influence quality of life.

Beck has argued that older forms of class structure – based mainly on the accumulation of wealth – atrophy in a modern, risk society, in which people occupy social risk positions that

are achieved through risk aversion. "In some of their dimensions these follow the inequalities of class and strata positions, but they bring a fundamentally different distribution logic into play". Beck contends that widespread risks contain a "boomerang effect", in that individuals producing risks will also be exposed to them. This argument suggests that wealthy individuals whose capital is largely responsible for creating pollution will also have to suffer when, for example, the contaminants seep into the water supply. This argument may seem oversimplified, as wealthy people may have the ability to mitigate risk more easily by, for example, buying bottled water. Beck, however, has argued that the distribution of this sort of risk is the result of knowledge, rather than wealth. Whilst the wealthy person may have access to resources that enable him or her to avert risk, this would not even be an option were the person unaware that the risk even existed. However, risks do not only affect those of a certain social class or place, as risk is not missed and can affect everyone regardless of societal class; no one is free from risk.

By contrast, Giddens has argued that older forms of class structure maintain a somewhat stronger role in a risk society, now being partly defined "in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualization and empowerment". Giddens has also tended to approach the concept of a risk society more positively than Beck, suggesting that there "can be no question of merely taking a negative attitude towards risk. Risk needs to be disciplined, but active risk-taking is a core element of a dynamic economy and an innovative society."

## 5. FROM INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY TO RISK SOCIETY

The shift from **Industrial Society** to **Risk Society** marks a change in how we organize our lives, politics, and fears. According to Ulrich Beck, the transition looks like this:

### 5.1 The Goal: Wealth vs. Safety

- **Industrial Society (Modernity):** The primary concern was the **distribution of goods** (wealth, jobs, and resources). People fought over who got what piece of the pie.
- **Risk Society (Late Modernity):** The primary concern is the **distribution of "bads"** (risks and hazards). The focus shifts from "I am hungry" to "I am afraid."

### 5.2 The Nature of Hazards

- **Industrial:** Risks were mostly "external" or natural (storms, famine) or localized (factory accidents). They were often visible and could be insured against.
- **Risk:** Hazards are "manufactured"—produced by the very industries and technologies meant to help us. They are **global** (radiation, climate change, microplastics), often **invisible** to the senses, and transcend national borders.

### 5.3 The Role of Knowledge and Experts

- **Industrial:** Science was seen as the undisputed solution to social problems. We trusted experts to provide safety.
- **Risk:** Science becomes **reflexive**. It creates new problems while trying to solve old ones, leading to a "crisis of trust." Experts often disagree, leaving the public in a state of chronic **cultural anxiety**.

### 5.4 Individualization

In late modernity, traditional safety nets (like stable careers, nuclear families, or religion) break down. This forces the individual to manage systemic risks (like economic shifts or health crises) on their own, turning global issues into personal anxieties.

## 6. CULTURAL ANXIETY IN LATE MODERNITY

In sociology, **cultural anxiety in late modernity** is defined as a collective, "diffuse" emotional state stemming from the radical transformation of modern institutions into a global, unpredictable, and highly reflexive "risk society".

Unlike specific fears of immediate danger, this form of anxiety is an **ontological insecurity**—a background state of dread caused by the breakdown of traditional certainties like stable careers, lifelong marriages, and clear social norms.

### Core Theoretical Drivers

- a. **Risk Society (Ulrich Beck)**: Modernity has shifted from distributing "goods" (wealth) to distributing "bads" (risks like environmental collapse or economic crashes). Anxiety arises because these risks are "manufactured" by the same scientific and industrial systems meant to protect us, leading to a "globalization of doubt".
- b. **Reflexive Individualisation (Anthony Giddens)**: In a "post-traditional" world, individuals must constantly monitor and "re-invent" their identities. This "reflexive project of the self" creates anxiety because every choice (from diet to career) becomes a personal responsibility; failure is no longer blamed on fate, but on the individual's "bad choice".
- c. **Liquid Modernity (Zygmunt Bauman)**: Social structures have become "liquid," meaning they no longer hold their shape long enough for people to rely on them. This constant fluidity forces people to live like "tourists" in their own lives, causing a persistent sense of precarity and a loss of long-term security.
- d. **Distorted Network Dynamics**: Anxiety emerges when social integration mechanisms fail. For instance, if meritocracy is perceived as an "illusion" or if experts (scientists, politicians) are no longer trusted, the resulting "crisis of confidence" detaches fear from specific events and makes it a general horizon of expectation.

### Key Manifestations

- a) **Identity Uncertainty**: Rapid globalization and cultural hybridization make it difficult for individuals to define their place in the world, leading to "cultural insecurity".
- b) **Ethnic Essentialism**: As a defense against the "shock" of globalization, some groups retreat into strict, "essentialist" cultural identities to regain a sense of belonging and "immortal" cultural continuity.
- c) **Virtual Anticipation**: In Western late modernity, anxiety is often "future-oriented," rooted in the constant mental visualization and anticipation of potential catastrophes, regardless of their actual probability.

## 7. CRITICISM TO BECK'S WORK

Deborah Lupton points out that Beck demonstrates anger at the hazardous nature of life in late modernity. Beck envisages that the whole human civilization may be destroyed by danger and hazard created by the risk society which is an outcome of high modernization. Lupton observes weak version of the social constructionism in Beck's writing where he writes about the social and cultural processes by which understandings and perceptions of risk are mediated. Critics have alleged that „reflexive modernization“ proposition is based on generalizations that lack grounding in everyday life and real experiences of people. They also allege that Beck and Giddens conceptualization of modernity and self-reflexivity or reflexive modernization as simplistic. They have not considered the complexity of various kinds of

forces and resistance with the modernization process itself. Both the sociologists are alleged that they have ignored the communal or collective understanding and resistance to the shared meaning on risk while evaluating individualization.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The idea and concept of risk society was developed by German sociologist Ulrich Beck and later on Anthony Giddens also contributed to the literature. Beck developed this concept in response to the modern and industrialised society. Risk society is conceptualized in terms of society's response to the harm, hazard and insecurities created and induced by the modern and industrialised society. Both Beck and Giddens look at various process of the modern industrial society and calculate the risk generated by it. Contemporary times is marked by high modernism and there exists a global world in terms of network of technologies through telecommunication, information and communication technologies. At the same time it has created hazards and danger to the environment Nuclear proliferation and warfare are examples of this kind. In their analysis ecological and environmental concern holds crucial importance.

Ulrich Beck argues that risk is self-created and manufactured by the modern human beings. To counter the excessive domination of modern industrialization and minimise the risk, collective and individual social concerns led to the process of reflexive modernization. Beck developed the concept of reflexive modernization along with risk society. Reflexive modernization is a counter answer to the rising nuclear proliferation and massive industrialization of the society. As critique to modernization and industrialization, reflexive modernization surfaced in the society. It is widely agreed among social scientists that risk has affected the modern society and reflexive modernization is the counter to the risk society which is proposed by Beck and Giddens. Individualization approach gives an individual scope to orient his or her life according to various choices.

It creates a multiplicity of option unlike pre-modern era where society used to function in more or less within a fixed kind of structure. Today, unlike the past, individuals are responsible for creating their own life story or biography with self-introspection or what Beck calls as reflexive biography. In this condition, society is no more controlling the individual totally rather it is a part of individual's creation of the self.

## **REFERENCE**

1. Beck, Ulrich. "Living in the World Risk Society." *Economy and Society* Volume 35, no.3(2006):329- 345.
2. Beck, Ulrich. *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995 Beck, Ulrich. *Reflexive governance: politics in the global risk society* in Jan-Peter Voß,
3. Dierk Bauknecht and René Kemp (Ed) *Reflexive Governance for Sustainable Development*, pp. 31-56, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006.
4. Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* translated by Mark Ritter London: Sage Publications, 1992. Beck, Ulrich. *The reinvention of politics: towards a theory of reflexive modernization*.
5. Douglas, Mary and Aaron Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*.
6. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983 Elliott, Anthony.
7. Ulrich Beck: *MODERNITY, RISK, AND REFLEXIVITY Risk Society and Reflexive Modernization*: