

Research Article

Pandemic and the Risk: A Sociological Analysis of Present Condition of Indian Society Due to Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Indian society is diverse and has a complex social order. It has been shaped by various processes such as industrialization, globalization, and modernization. Indian societies are often affected by various public health crises. Recently COVID-19 outbreak has shattered the world. After its emergence in the city of Wuhan in China, it has gradually spread to other countries making them more vulnerable. Academicians and the experts have warned about the deadliest consequences of COVID-19. Sociologists who study social phenomena need to analyze the consequences associated with COVID-19 sociologically. The consequences are not simply health issues but in terms of economy, education, and many more. The world affected by the pandemic is all set to alter the societal structures and functions. The entire globe is at risk because of this. The concept of risk society was advocated by Ulrich Beck and for him; risks of modern society are reflexive and self-induced. Technological changes and human activities have been the causes of risk in modern society. With the impact of globalization, the consequence of the risk is not only personal but also global. The 'new modernity' phase of the modern world ultimately has given birth to a risk society. In new modernity, nature and society are one hence every action goes for the management of this risk. COVID-19 has not only affected the Indian health sector but also our environment, education sector, economy, polity, and, everything. The risks are multifaceted and India being a developing country is more vulnerable. The present paper is based on secondary sources and aims at discussing the

risk society concept in association with Indian society due to the present COVID-19 situation. Along with this, the paper attempts to suggest possible ways of managing these risks.

Keywords: Industrialization, Globalization, Modernization, Risk society, New Modernity

INTRODUCTION

Modern societies are subject to change. The process of modernization has begun right after the development of industrial society. Industrial revolution and globalization have shaped India to a great extent. With colonization and globalization, Indian society became modern. With modernity, no society is devoid of problems or issues. The social life has become riskier with passing time. For example, the problem of climate change was not serious ten decades earlier. The issue got serious with passing time and with the evolution of modern societies. In modern society, the risks are distributed across the nations. It cuts across the territorial boundaries. If we take the issue of the present scenario that is the Corona pandemic, then we can observe multiple risks associated with it. Pandemics are not new to societies. There have been many pandemics and the only difference was in terms of the nature of risks associated with them. The present pandemic needs a sociological perspective to analyze the issue in a better way. COVID-19 that emerged in the city of Wuhan became a global pandemic within a short period. This rapid spread is again a bright example of globalized and modernized societies.

All societies are production oriented. The production gives rise to the accumulation of wealth and also a risk. In the contemporary world, the risks are scientifically and technologically produced (Beck, 1990). The process of modernization unleashed all kinds of risks in society be it pollution, any other problems that harm plants, animals, and humans. The production of the risk is very systematic and invisible. Again the scientific knowledge plays an important role in expanding, dramatizing, and diminishing the risks. Hence the knowledge community including the medical practitioners, famous civil society organizations are playing a major role in defining risk and this role puts them in important positions in society (Beck, 1990). For example, scientists who are developing vaccines and renowned institutions like WHO are playing a major role in the current pandemic.

The inequality and a wide gap also result from the risks of the modern world. Risk is not equally spread. It differentiates. The differentiation is based on the various existing stratification in society. There is always inequality between the developed and the

developing nation. Again the emerging risks due to modernization also vary on these bases. COVID-19 and the risks associated with it affect the countries differently all over the world. India being a developing nation has been affected differently. The risks that India is dealing with are unique in many terms. Before going deeper into India's risks due to COVID-19, let's first discuss the concept of the risk society which is very popular in the discipline of Sociology.

The Concept of Risk Society

The concept of risk society was propounded by Ulrich Beck. Risk and security have been the issues of sociological concern since the 1970s and 1980s (Kaufmann and Wichum, 2016). When we talk about risk, it is not simply a catastrophe but the anticipation of catastrophe (Beck, 2009). In *Risk Society* (1992) and *Ecological politics in an age of risks* (1995), Beck has pointed out that the risks originate from the technological usages and he has given the examples of ecological problems, such as nuclear energy, genetic and reproduction technology, forest decline, loss of biodiversity, climate change, and AIDS. These risks are reflexive as they can go and act beyond the boundaries of the origination. He has referred it as the blurring of the boundaries. In traditional societies, risks had limited local temporal and social scope but in the new modern society, risk has become global. The scope of the risks is no more limited. Everyone has an equal chance of being affected. To substantiate this, he said, "Poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic" (Beck, 1992). For example, the issue of climate change may be caused by a few powerful wealthy countries but the consequences and problems associated with it are shared by all.

Beck further elaborates that the risk is more about the problem of knowledge and definition on the part of the individual or the group. Beck calls it an "expropriation of the senses". He added, "Living in world risk society means living with ineradicable non-knowing or, to be more precise, with the simultaneity of threats and non-knowing". Individuals are not aware of the risks they live with. This lack of knowledge about the risks makes them more vulnerable.

Risks in modern society are multidimensional. For example, the problem of climate change is not only having health impacts but also social, economic, political, and other side effects. Thus in the risk society, every aspect of the issue needs to be looked at. To do away with risk, these need to be handled properly. Protection against them and handling them can also involve a reorganization of power and authority. Thus the society of risk is also a catastrophe society. Different types of risks that are there are not at all visible but tend to threaten human existence. To make these risks visible, sometimes, the help of science is taken. For example, the harms posed by the

radioactivity can only be known with the help of the experts or researchers or science. By using different methodologies, they can map the risks. But risks objectively have an equalizing effect concerning the range and degree of people's exposure. Risk society does not acknowledge division and differentiation across the globe. Because of modernization and globalization, the gap or the differences has got shortened. In this sense, risk societies are not class societies and their risk situations cannot be understood as class situations, nor their conflicts as class conflicts.

The consequences of the risks are not direct and immediate rather they have a prolonged effect on the related phenomena indirectly. For example, climate change may not involve the destruction of the planet and extinction of the human species immediately rather they lead to gradual losses such as a change in weather, impacting the livelihood of the farmers, and extinction of some selected species. This is never a direct threat to human life rather the process is gradual and evolving in nature (Beck, 1990). Hence the impact of COVID-19 is going to be with us in the long run.

Beck writes: 'it is cultural perception and definition that constitute risk'. Risk is culturally perceived and defined. It differs from group to group, class to class, society to society, and nation to nation. There exists a systematic force of attraction between extreme poverty and extreme risk. The poorest and vulnerable groups, classes, societies, and nations are going to have the worst of the thing and have the highest risk than that of the advantaged groups, classes, societies, and nations because they have the resources and potential to mitigate every new risk associated with modern societies. Anthony Elliott in 2002 viewed that modern social institutions have failed to take care of the risks they have created and that is why risks bounce back. For instance, if climate change and the risks associated are not addressed, the risk will be multiplied and will have huge and significant repercussions.

For Beck, the risk is very much different than that of the hazards and dangers. Hazards and dangers were there in the pre-industrial societies which included famine plagues, famine, and natural disasters. There was no risk in traditional society. The concept of risk has arisen in modern industrial society because of the emergence of the techno-science. The present-day risks are more harmful than that of the hazards and dangers of the past or the pre-industrial societies. For him, the risks are more in the daily activities of the people of modern societies. In traditional societies, the experiences of hazards were pre-given and were coming from nature or supernatural powers but in the modern age, everyday new kinds of risk are emerging.

When a settled and an advanced society was set forth, there was an urge to control and secure the future on the part of the humans which made the issue more political. The modernization process has become reflexive and has made the societies more

dynamic and complex as a result of which people have started self-confronting the consequences of risk. For them, these risks are not possible to be addressed and controlled. The risks of modernized societies are automatically generated and when these societies are not being able to solve them, their decision-making capacity is questioned.

Risks in Indian Society

Beck has written on the risk society in his book *The Risk Society* and again in the early twenty-first century in *World at Risk*. He tried to make the world aware of the emerging risk and the pervasiveness of the risk. The risk is now global. The successive stage of modernity lies in institutional efforts to control risks and perceive risks. In the “first” modernity, efforts were made to manage and “demoralize” risk. For example, a worker injured or killed in a factory in the late nineteenth century was considered “guilty” of the injuries he or she suffered and the corporation owning the factory claimed to be blameless. In the “second” modernity, institutions attempted to manage risk by anticipating dangers that people had not experienced. Terrorism is the most recent manifestation of this. Beck also used the threat of climate change as another example of risk institutions have attempted to control, albeit with little success thus far (Culver, 2011).

With the spread of COVID-19, Indian society is facing major risks. Risks have multiplied in the present situation. Though the risks were invisible in the initial period, it became visible as the scientific and research community attempted to analyze the existing risks. The following are the areas where risks are multiple.

1. Economy of India
2. Educational sector
3. Health sector
4. The plight of the vulnerable population
5. Environmental crises
6. Religious aspect
7. Political aspect

Economy

India is facing an economic turndown due to COVID-19. There has been a sharp fall in FDI, economic growth, and the overall economic scenario of the country. If we put Marxist theory, then with the rising risk in the economic infrastructure the

superstructure is also going to collapse. All the sectors of the economy including agriculture, industry, and service sector have also fallen. Most importantly the MSME sector which contributes 6.11% of the manufacturing GDP and 24.63% from the service activities is suffering from the problems of declining revenue and capacity utilization (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2020). Due to the lockdown and COVID spread, there is the problem of labor availability. Talking about agriculture, along with the problems of rising inflation, interrupted supply chain, processing, transport and distribution, availability of seeds, fertilizer shortage, limited access to animal feed, delivery of breeding stock and shortage of labor farmers are leading a life full of chaos. With the mounting pressure of lack of health services and social protection, reduction in income and purchasing capacity, lack of access, scarcity of public goods farmers have gone into a deep hollow. A sharp rise in unemployment, the collapse of the tourism industry, the hospitality industry, reduced consumer activities are adding to the current problems. The trade has fallen sharply leading to the less economic growth of the nation. IMF reported the fall of global trade by 31.9% due to COVID-19.

Educational sector

COVID-19 has led to educational deprivation of students going to school and colleges. Lack of internet facilities, android mobile phones, and tablets have further deteriorated the conditions as there are obstacles in online learning practices. Girl students suffer the most because of the patriarchal setups in the families and because of the existing gender stereotypes. The unequal access to technology can affect the educational system of the country in the long run. Midday scheme has been stopped because of the closing of the schools which has also led to a lack of nutrition and children have started rag picking in Bihar.

Health sector

Health is the sector that has been directly affected by the pandemic. High risks alert has been set for the health workers including the doctor nurses. The shortage of health workers and the infrastructure has been the subject of concern immediately after the pandemic struck the Indian Territory. India indeed spends only 1.6% of its GDP in the health sector which is a subject of concern. During the disaster of the pandemic, the investment needs to be very high. As per the 2019 Global Health Security Index, India fails the test of readiness for the health disaster. The rank of India remained 145th out of the 195 countries on Healthcare Access and Quality (HAQ) index in 2016 (Lancet, 2020). Inequality in the health sector can be visualized from the uncertainty of the development and distribution of the vaccine to all the developing nations of the world.

The plight of the vulnerable population

Many categories of people who were already vulnerable are being pushed to a world of hell. These vulnerable sections include the women, children, elderly, disabled, domestic workers, daily wage laborers, and migrants. Along with the financial issues, man's other issues regarding their political rights and political participation have come to the limelight during the lockdown days because of the pandemic.

Women face a major problem of increasing household burden without the help of male partners in household works. Domestic violence against women got doubled during the pandemic as per the report of the National Commission of Women. Cybercrime against women recorded to be high. Pregnant women are prone to be corona positive. Children are vulnerable because of the hamper in their studies and prone to the ill effects of broken families. UNICEF has reported, "This is a universal crisis and for, some children, the impact will be lifelong". The number of children living in monetary poor households will soar. Child nutrition is being hampered; the risk to child safety is there.

Disabled people have a lot to lose due to the pandemic. Caregivers are not able to reach out to them. Access to medicine and groceries becomes a difficult task. Therapy and rehabilitation have stopped. They just cannot practice social distancing as they need to wash their hands. Women with disabilities have not been included in the vulnerable section. They are excluded from the mainstream population and their situation continues to be deplorable. They face the problems of poverty, lack of education, and social prejudices and are at greater risk of sexual assault and violence. They are also denied of sexual and reproductive rights. The elderly population is at high risk of the COVID-19. People having diabetes, cardiovascular disease raise the risk. Because the population has a weak immune system, survival is very difficult. As per WHO data, more than 95% of COVID-19 deaths were from the age group of above 60 years (Kluge, 2020).

Daily wage laborers are not able to get work or come out of their homes in search of work. MGNREGA has also failed to provide 100 days of jobs to the needy poor people. Again women are being excluded from the benefit and employment. Migrant workers suffered the most because they had to evacuate the host state and return to the home state. Without any social security system and welfare measures for them, life has become a burden for them. Their problem of exercising voting right has recently been highlighted and there is an urge to create "One Nation One Voter ID".

Domestic help workers are not able to get back to their jobs because they are suspected to carry the virus. With no income and lack of facilities, the domestic help workers are being excluded from their basic human rights.

The elderly population, pregnant women, Dalits, foreigners, religious minorities and undertrials are being denied bail and being treated inhumanely inside the custody leading to death in the overcrowding prisons with COVID-19 infection. During the lockdown, the issues of custodial violence have also come to the limelight with the death case in Tamil Nadu. Hence the structural and institutional aspects of the risk are coming out which needs urgent attention.

Environmental crises

The overall environment of the country has improved a lot. Air pollution and other pollutants that were previously leading to global warming and health hazards have now stopped.

Religious aspect

The major function of religion that is integrating the society is at stake because of the pandemic. Various religious services have been canceled. The pilgrimage and offering of services in collectivity have been stopped. Many religious institutions have started providing food and medical assistance to the poor section of the society. The strongest influence of religion on human behavior has been reduced leading to a chaotic mental state hence a disorganized society. The role of religion in the pandemic has been altered. In India, because of the Tablighi Jamaat issue, some tend to blame the Muslim minority community of being responsible for the spread of the pandemic. But sectarianism will never help in defeating corona. Pandemic has even led to communal feelings among Indians against each other based on religion.

Political aspect

The pandemic has resulted in the expansion of the state or more centralization of power. People face difficulty in participation and exercising voting rights. Social polarization has increased with that. It has further led to the emancipation and accountability of the government. institutions. Online mobilization and digital campaigning are being utilized to have a political dominance in the country. Globally there has been an attempt to be a political superpower within China and U.S. India has a border clash with China which is further deteriorating the geopolitics. There is no doubt that globalization has led to an interconnected world and the problem or risks of one nation are affecting the politics of every other nation.

The linkages

Air pollution, global warming, and the weak health system have a strong linkage. The data shows that the most polluted cities have the highest mortality rate due to COVID-

19. Delhi being the most polluted city of the country has also the highest fatality rate. Other states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu have the highest COVID rates in the country. Tamil Nadu and Kerala could manage such a situation with their good health care services. India being the 5th most vulnerable country to climate change has to face it all and need to change its priorities and policies.

A linkage has been found between the global political scenario and the national politics and economy. After the border clash with China in Galwan valley, Indian banned Chinese apps from functioning in India because of privacy and national integrity concerns. It has a strong repercussion on the Indian economy as well as on China because many Indian startups and the market system are dependent on the Chinese investment and Chinese supply of goods and services. China is also the largest provider of technology globally. By simply banning Chinese interference in Indian territory, the Indian economy is at stake. Trade and functioning of the Indian market are suffering. The risks have got distributed between both countries.

The vulnerable sections of the society and the political life of the nation is again related. As they do not raise their voices and also practice lesser political rights, they are ignored by the political parties. They do not constitute the vote bank and hence all their issues are ignored and described as irrelevant by the politicians. This is further making them backward and excluded from the mainstream population.

MEASURES

When we talk about risk, we also need to focus on the security concept. The security of the country can be ensured with the active participation of all the protagonists such as the state, the public agencies, and organization, then the infrastructural operators such as the railway, education, private sectors, religious communities, and every individual. They need to be identified and be responsible (Kaufmann and Wichum, 2016).

The entire social order has been threatened with the existence of the risks and this need to be solved. Beck's theory of risk society is based on the concept of reflexive modernization. Its essence lies in the ability of the society to confront all the consequences which may be positive or negative. Society needs to become aware of all the risks associated with the current situation and act accordingly and make such an institutional arrangement that will encounter these risks. Beck's formulation of the problem serves a goal concerning social theory to solve and mitigate the risks of society.

- Access to services by all categories of the population needs to be ensured. There should be no discrimination based on sex, religion, caste, creed, community, and

descent. Covid-19 is a disaster and Disaster Management Act, 2005, Section 61 rules that there should be no discrimination on the above grounds while providing compensation and relief to the victims of the disaster.

- Vulnerable populations need to be taken care of by providing the social security and basic amenities including their right to health.
- Education needs to be imparted to all the children. Internet facilities and computers, android phones and tablets can be donated to the needy. Sometimes the lack of electricity hinders the learning process in rural areas. This issue can be addressed efficiently so that children can learn from televisions.
- Free food grains and money must be provided to the family for the school going children and their need of per day calories and proteins must be maintained with the help of Anganwadi workers and school teachers.
- The voices of the marginalized population need to be heard and a grievance redressal mechanism must be developed to address those.
- Trained health and rehabilitation officials must be appointed in every district so that they can work to help people manage the risks at the ground level.
- Preventing the communal feeling among people through online campaigns and motivating people to be united to face the risk.
- Preserving the environment and continuation of air pollution reduction through strict implementation of the policies.
- Maintaining transparency and accountability in every govt. decisions.
- Democratic spirit, equality, and liberty to be preserved by improving the political participation rates.
- Investing more in social security and economy of the country and various COVID recovery policies.
- Using technology and Artificial Intelligence in terms of robotics in the health delivery system in the health sector. Kerala has already implemented robotics in the service of patients.
- Regulating the economy through effective monetary policy and saving the economy from the liquidity trap. The liquidity trap has already led to the collapse of the economy in Japan in the 1990s and Great Depression in 2008.
- Supporting the private sectors and MSMEs by providing easy credits and a good environment of ease of doing business.

- Extending the days of work under MGNREGA and other such schemes to accommodate the working-age population in the rural areas and providing them income.
- Digitizing the trade infrastructure of the country as the pandemic demands less human intervention and social distancing.
- Strengthening women grievance cells and supporting women through SHGs.
- Preventing criminal activities against women through strict implementation of the laws.
- Granting bail to elderly people and pregnant women under trials as they have more risk of infection.
- There is a need for a coordinated global effort to tackle the impacts as everything is interrelated and interdependent in the globalized world.

CONCLUSION

Simply thinking about risk will not help in having a peaceful society rather there is the need of acting to mitigate these risks. Making each entity responsible and challenging the risk and attempting to manage it will surely be a solution to the world risk society rather than simply politicization of the risks as stated by Ulrich Beck (Krahmann, 2011). India has already started to manage the risks of the pandemic with the formulation and implementation of efficient policies such as the Atma Nirbhar Bharat scheme, Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Anna Yojana, providing free food grain to vulnerable sections or ration card holders through Public Distribution System (PDS). It cannot be denied that the risks have not been politicized but on the other hand, there have also been efforts to minimize the risks of the pandemic. We can only be positive in our words and actions and move forward to address the risks to have a sustainable and better future of our country.

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