Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity

> ***Mains Syllabus: GS I - Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India; Role of women , developmental issues, urbanization, their problems and their remedies.***

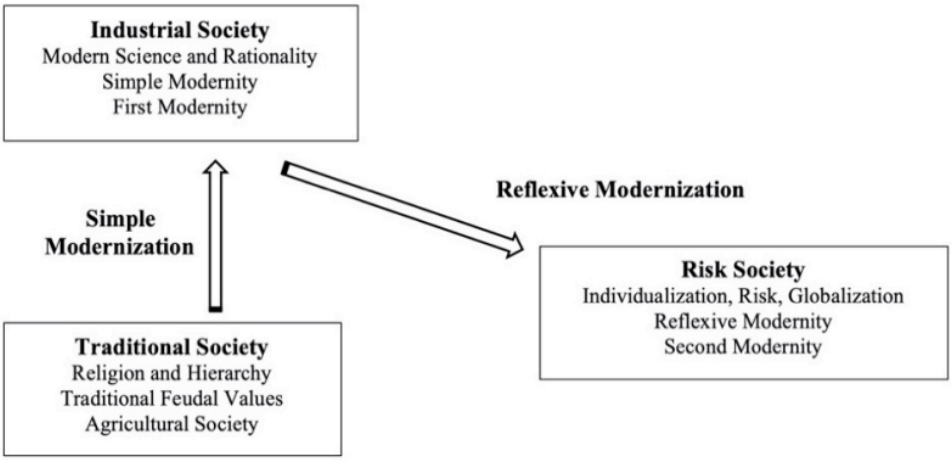
Why in the News?

Despite technological advancements and promises of progress, we find ourselves continually facing new, unforeseen risks.

What is a Risk society?

> *The book " Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity" was written by Ulrich Beck and published in 1986 provide a panoramic analysis of the condition of Western societies.*

- **Risk society** - The term "risk society" describes a shift from an industrial society to one increasingly shaped by uncertainty and hazards created by technological and environmental developments.
- **Focus in a risk society** - In such a society, the focus moves from the distribution of wealth to the prevention and management of risks, including health crises, pollution, and environmental degradation, that arise from modernisation itself.
- **Reflexive modernisation** – It is the idea that modern societies must constantly reflect on and adapt to the problems they have created.
- The successes of industrialisation, such as nuclear energy and fossil fuel use, generated new, often unforeseen risks.
- These risks began to overshadow the benefits of progress, proponents of the theory argue, with disasters like nuclear explosions, pandemics, and climate hazards being examples of this.



How have risks transformed in various stages of societal evolution?

- **Risks in pre-industrial society** - In the pre-industrial era, society was characterised by a stable, agrarian economy where risks were largely natural and mostly localised, such as famine and epidemics.
    - **Risk management** - Risks were managed in such societies based on social order and traditional knowledge systems.
- **Industrial society** - The rise of industrialism brought about large-scale production, urbanisation, and technological advancements that transformed both society and the global economy.
- The world became a more open place with increased global transactions.
- **Risks in industrial society** - It also introduced new risks, including pollution, depletion of natural resources, and the development of riskier technologies, which were often global in scale.
- **Risk in modernization period** - The rapid pace of modernisation, without proper checks and balances, has resulted in a risk society, where there is a fundamental shift in how risks are perceived and managed.
- **Change in risk character** - Risks are no longer seen as external threats but are increasingly generated by the very systems intended to ensure development and security.
- **Interconnection of risks** - Environmental disasters, pandemics, and technological failures reveal the interconnected and global nature of the risks we now face, with consequences that often cross national borders and remain unpredictable.

Traditional Society	Industrial Society	Risk Society
Incalculable threat: no knowledge of when the next catastrophe will come	Calculable risk	Incalculable risk: uninsurable
Organizational logics: local	Organizational logics: national	Organizational logics: global
Limited specific threats	Temporally and spatially bound threats	Threats unbounded in time and space
Simple understanding of blame and causality	Complex understanding of blame and causality	Incomprehensible in standard terms of blame and causality
Prevailing beliefs anchored in tradition	First modernity: faith in progress and reason	Reflexive modernity: all knowledge and practice called into question
Manufactured risks: insignificant	Manufactured risks: latent	Manufactured risks: dominant
Paradigmatic risk: natural catastrophe	Paradigmatic risk: industrial accident	Paradigmatic risk: radioactive leak
Subjectivity informed by hunger	Subjectivity informed by inequality	Subjectivity informed by fear

What are the manufactured risks?

- **Natural risks** - Risks such as earthquakes, floods, and diseases like malaria, are unpredictable and often localised.
- **Manufactured risks** – They arise from human activities, especially technological and industrial developments.
- These include nuclear accidents, environmental degradation, and pandemics.
- **Deeper impact of manufactured risks** - Manufactured risks often have global implications and are typically more difficult to predict, control, or mitigate.
- **Significance of distinguishing risks** - It highlights how modern society, while advancing technologically, has also become more vulnerable to new forms of risk that are a byproduct of its own progress.
- **Disproportionate impact** - Although risks such as climate change, extreme weather events are global, they disproportionately affect poorer countries, which are less equipped to adapt to or mitigate these dangers.

What is the gender dimension in these risks?

- **Unequal burden** - In a risk society, the management of risks is central to both policy and daily life, but the burden is not equally distributed.
- **Role of gender** - Gender roles play a key role in determining who faces the more significant consequences of environmental disasters, health risks, and economic vulnerabilities.
- **Women at the forefront** - Women, especially in developing countries, are often the primary caregivers and household managers, placing them at the forefront of risk mitigation.
- Their work, whether as unpaid domestic labour or in informal sectors, often goes

unrecognised, further reinforcing their vulnerability.

- **Historical vulnerability of women** - They are historically more vulnerable due to unequal access to resources, decision-making power, and healthcare services, exacerbating their exposure to these risks.
- **Environmental vulnerabilities of women** - Women are also often more susceptible to health risks associated with environmental hazards, such as water pollution, contaminated air, and ecological imbalances.
    - **Water pollution** - For instance, in many parts of the world, women are primarily responsible for collecting water for their households.
    - If these water sources are contaminated, the health risks extend directly to them.
    - **Air pollution** - Similarly, women in low-income settings may cook using solid fuels like wood or coal, which release harmful pollutants into the air, leading to respiratory diseases.
- **Disproportionate impact** - The impact of natural risks like extreme weather events, soil degradation, and water scarcity also disproportionately affects women's access to food and water, which in turn affects their health.
- **Health impact** - Gender norms frequently result in women eating last or eating less than their male counterparts.
- According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), anaemia affects 57% of women in India, compared to 25% of men.

How economic inequality exacerbates women's vulnerability?

- Women's economic position often exacerbates their vulnerability to the consequences of a risk society.
- **Limited access to resources** - In many cultures, women have limited access to financial resources, land, and property, which limits their ability to recover from environmental or economic disasters.
- **Food insecurity** - When climate change leads to crop failure or extreme weather, women in rural areas are often the first to suffer from food insecurity.
- **Gendered responsibilities** - Women's caregiving roles, whether in terms of childcare, eldercare, or managing health, are often undervalued and unsupported.
- These gendered responsibilities mean that women bear the emotional and physical burden of managing risks, even as they face the unequal distribution of resources that would allow them to cope effectively.

Conclusion

- In a world increasingly shaped by both manufactured and natural risks, the concept of the risk society underscores the importance of reflection and adaptation in addressing the consequences of modernisation.
- The concept also reveals the gendered dimensions of risk, focusing on how women are disproportionately affected by these challenges and play vital roles in managing and mitigating risks.

Reference

The Hindu| Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity

