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Living in a Runaway World: Modern Change and the Limits of Social Control in Indian Society

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary Indian society through the idea of a “runaway world”, where social change moves faster than the ability of institutions, norms, and authorities to regulate it effectively. In India, economic reforms, rapid digital expansion, media saturation, and urban growth have quickly reshaped everyday life, while systems of regulation, care, and accountability often lag behind. Drawing on Anthony Giddens’ concept of runaway modernity, the paper argues that society is increasingly shaped by human-made systems—markets, technologies, expert knowledge, and state policies—that acquire their own momentum, generating outcomes that are difficult to predict or control. This condition does not create simple disorder but sustained pressure. Social control persists in fragmented forms through law, digital platforms, surveillance, moral fear, and public anger, none of which inspire lasting trust. Consequently, individuals are forced to manage risks once handled by institutions, producing anxiety, adjustment, and everyday exhaustion. Focusing on lived experiences, particularly among youth and socially vulnerable groups, the paper shows how uncertainty around work, education, and belonging is unevenly distributed along social lines. It concludes that responding to a runaway society cannot depend solely on faster policies or technologies, but requires renewed attention to responsibility, protection, and forms of social care that can slow change and sustain social cohesion.

Keywords

Runaway society, Indian modernity, Social control, Uncertainty, Risk, Everyday life, Digital change, Inequality, Late modernity, Governance.

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1. Introduction

Indian society today is often described as changing but that word feels too calm for what is actually being lived because what many people experience is not gradual movement but a sense of being pushed forward by forces that rarely pause, explain themselves or wait for consent and this feeling of speed has quietly entered daily routines, conversations, expectations and fears. Life moves faster. Decisions pile up. Consequences arrive late. For many, this is not an abstract idea discussed in classrooms or books; it is felt in the way jobs appear and disappear, in how technology enters homes before people understand its rules, in how traditions lose their grip while nothing equally firm takes their place. Something feels loose. This paper begins from that everyday feeling and uses it to think about Indian society as part of what Anthony Giddens calls a 'runaway world', a condition where modern institutions and systems created by human action begin to move beyond the capacity of societies to guide or control them in stable ways (Giddens, 1999). The key point here is not simply that India is modernizing but that the pace and scale of change often exceed the ability of social control through law, custom, moral authority or state regulation to keep up. That gap matters. It shapes how people plan their lives, whom they trust and how they deal with uncertainty. The experience of speed is uneven, but it is widespread. From digital payments to online education, from media-driven politics to platform-based work, change enters life quickly sometimes next to older practices that still exist but no longer guide behaviour with the same force. Tradition once worked as a quiet regulator of action offering ready-made answers about family, work, belief and duty, but in contemporary India these answers increasingly appear optional, contested or fragile pushing individuals toward choice-based living where one must decide again and again how to act, who to be and what risks to accept. This shift toward choice is often celebrated as freedom yet as Giddens notes in his work on late modernity, choice without stable support structures also produces

anxiety and what he calls ontological insecurity, a weak sense of continuity in the self and the world (Giddens, 1991). In India, this insecurity is intensified by deep inequalities, rapid urbanization and uneven institutional reach which means that while modern systems spread quickly, protection does not spread at the same speed. Control lags behind change. This lag can be seen in many areas like regulation struggles to match technological innovation, environmental laws chase development projects after damage is done, labour protections trail behind new forms of work and social norms lose authority faster than new ethical frameworks can form. Ulrich Beck's idea of the risk society is useful here as it highlights how modern risks are no longer external or natural but produced within social systems themselves and how responsibility for managing these risks increasingly shifts onto individuals rather than institutions (Beck, 1992).

In the Indian case, this shift is visible in how people are asked to manage their own education, employment, health and even safety in conditions where outcomes feel unpredictable and support feels partial. Control has not disappeared. That would be too simple. Instead, it appears in broken and uneven forms, sometimes through state power, sometimes through market logic, sometimes through digital surveillance and sometimes through moral pressure amplified by media. None of these forms feels complete. This paper takes that tension seriously and treats the runaway world not as a metaphor but as a social condition that shapes lived experience in India. It asks a set of connected questions that guide the analysis like how does accelerated modern change reshape everyday life in Indian society, why do existing systems of social control struggle to keep pace with this change, and who bears the cost of this imbalance between speed and regulation? The core argument developed in this article is that Indian society is experiencing a form of compressed modernity where global processes of economic reform, digital expansion, cultural transformation etc. unfold rapidly on a social base marked by inequality and institutional limits producing a situation where change feels constant but control feels thin. This argument draws on and extends sociological discussions of modernity, risk and social order developed by Giddens (1999), Beck (1992), and Zygmunt Bauman whose notion of liquid modernity captures the sense of instability and weak social bonds characteristic of fast-moving societies (Bauman, 2000). At the same time, the paper is attentive to critiques from scholars of the Global South who caution against

treating Western experiences of modernity as universal pointing out that in societies like India, modernity often arrives unevenly and interacts with older hierarchies of caste, class, gender and region in complex ways (Chakrabarty, 2000; Omvedt, 2003). This makes the Indian case especially important for sociological debates on runaway modernity because it shows how speed and uncertainty are filtered through existing social structures rather than replacing them entirely.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bring together theory and lived reality using the idea of a runaway world to make sense of everyday experiences of uncertainty, pressure, adaptation in contemporary India while also contributing to a broader sociology of modernity that takes the Global South seriously as a site of theory-building rather than mere application. Modernity here is not a finished state. It is a condition under strain. And that strain is what this article seeks to understand.

2. Theoretical Framework

The idea of a runaway society emerges from Anthony Giddens' broader attempt to understand late modernity as a condition in which the main forces shaping social life are no longer external or traditional but produced from within society itself and once set in motion these forces often move faster than collective reflection, regulation or moral agreement can follow (Giddens, 1999). Giddens does not describe modernity as a stable system with clear direction; instead, he treats it as a dynamic process driven by human-made institutions like markets, science, technology, expert knowledge and bureaucratic systems etc. that gradually slip beyond the control of the very actors who created them. This is the core of runaway modernity. Change accelerates not because nature demands it, but because social systems reward speed, expansion and constant revision, and this acceleration creates a gap between what societies can do and what they can govern. That gap is crucial. In late modern conditions, social order is no longer anchored primarily in tradition or inherited authority but in abstract systems that operate across distance and time often without direct human contact, a process Giddens famously describes as disembedding (Giddens, 1991). Money, digital communication, legal systems, expert knowledge lift social relations out of local settings and reorganize them on a wider scale making everyday life dependent on systems that are trusted

rather than fully understood. Time and space shrink. Decisions made far away have immediate effects close to home. This compression intensifies the feeling that life is being lived inside structures that cannot easily be questioned or slowed down. Reflexivity deepens this condition. In late modernity, individuals and institutions are forced to constantly monitor, revise and justify their actions in the light of new information yet this reflexivity does not bring certainty; instead, it often produces instability because knowledge itself is provisional and open to challenge (Giddens, 1991).

Traditions lose their taken-for-granted authority not because they vanish but because they must now explain themselves, compete with alternatives and survive in an environment of choice. For individuals, this means that biography becomes a project rather than a given, shaped by repeated decisions about work, relationships, belief and identity, decisions that are made under conditions of uncertainty rather than guidance. The emotional cost of this condition is captured in Giddens' concept of ontological insecurity, a fragile sense of continuity and trust in the world that arises when routines are frequently disrupted and future outcomes feel unpredictable (Giddens, 1991). This insecurity is not a personal failure. It is social. Ulrich Beck's work on risk society extends this argument by showing how modern societies increasingly organize themselves around risks that are manufactured rather than natural, risks that are produced by industrial, scientific and technological activity and whose consequences are difficult to calculate or contain (Beck, 1992). In Beck's account, responsibility for managing these risks is steadily shifted away from institutions toward individuals who must navigate dangers they did not create and cannot fully control. This shift fits closely with the idea of a runaway world where systems generate side effects faster than regulation can respond.

Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity adds another layer emphasizing how social forms like jobs, relationships, communities even identities lose durability and become flexible, temporary and easily replaced leaving individuals to constantly adapt without the assurance of long-term stability (Bauman, 2000). Liquidity captures the lived texture of runaway modernity as things move but they do not settle. Manuel Castells' analysis of the network society further helps explain how power, communication and economic activity are reorganized through global networks enabled by information technology producing a social structure where flows

of information matter more than fixed locations and where inclusion and exclusion are shaped by access to networks rather than formal membership alone (Castells, 1996). Together, these perspectives form a theoretical conversation that frames runaway society not as a single theory but as a shared diagnosis of late modern conditions marked by speed, uncertainty, weakened forms of control. Yet applying these ideas to Indian society requires care. These theories were largely developed in Western contexts where welfare states, relatively stable institutions and industrial histories shaped the experience of modernity.

In India, modern change unfolds on a social terrain marked by deep inequality, strong but contested traditions, and uneven institutional capacity producing what many scholars describe as compressed or uneven modernity, where different historical stages coexist and collide (Chakrabarty, 2000). This does not invalidate runaway society theory; it complicates it. The disembedding of social relations in India occurs alongside enduring caste hierarchies, informal economies, moral frameworks etc. that still matter even as their authority weakens. Reflexivity exists, but it is unevenly distributed, shaped by education, class position and access to resources. Ontological insecurity is felt more sharply by those who lack buffers against risk. In this sense, runaway modernity in India does not erase structure; it rearranges it. This paper uses Giddens' framework as a starting point rather than a finished map placing it in dialogue with risk, liquidity and network perspectives while remaining attentive to the specific social conditions of Indian society. The goal is not to import Western theory unchanged, but to use it as a tool to think through how speed, uncertainty and weakened control are experienced, managed and resisted in a context where modernity arrives fast, unevenly and with consequences that are shared very unequally. That tension sits at the center of the analysis.

3. Modern Change in Indian Society

Modern change in Indian society is often narrated as a story of progress but when seen up close it feels less like a smooth journey and more like a constant push forward, uneven, tiring and hard to pause, and this section places that lived sense of speed at the center of analysis. Since the early 1990s, economic liberalization has restructured markets, work, consumption, aspiration etc. in ways that have reached deep into everyday life linking households, cities,

and even villages to global flows of capital, goods, and images at a pace that earlier generations never experienced (Jaffrelot, 2011). Markets expanded quickly. Opportunities appeared. So did insecurity. Stable employment shrank next to flexible and short-term work while consumption became a key marker of social status, reshaping desires and comparisons across class lines (Fernandes, 2006). This economic opening did not unfold evenly; it layered global market logic onto an already unequal social structure producing sharp gaps between those able to ride new opportunities and those left to adjust without protection. Speed increased. Protection did not.

Alongside market expansion, digitalization has transformed governance, economy and social relations with remarkable force pushing India into what many describe as a digitally mediated society where state services, banking, education, communication increasingly operate through platforms rather than face-to-face interaction (Nayar, 2012). Digital systems promise efficiency and reach but they also shift responsibility downward asking citizens to manage technology, data and risk on their own, often without clear support. This shift is visible in digital payments, online welfare delivery, platform-based work where systems function quickly but accountability remains hard to locate. Life becomes easier in some ways and more fragile in others. Urbanization and migration intensify this condition. Indian cities have grown rapidly pulling in migrants from rural and small-town backgrounds who arrive seeking work and security but often encounter informal housing, unstable employment and weak civic support creating a constant churn of population that strains infrastructure and social cohesion (Breman, 2016). Urban space expands faster than planning, and migration becomes a survival strategy rather than a clear path to stability. Media saturation adds another layer to this compressed modernity. News, social media, advertising and entertainment circulate without pause compressing time and attention while shaping opinions, fears, desires at high speed, often faster than verification or reflection can follow (Thussu, 2007). Information accelerates. Meaning struggles to settle. Public debate becomes reactive, emotional and short-lived reinforcing a sense that society is always responding rather than steering.

All of this unfolds in a context where modern systems coexist with fragile institutions. Laws exist but enforcement is uneven. Welfare schemes expand yet access remains partial. Traditional norms weaken but new moral frameworks remain thin. This

coexistence produces what can be called compressed modernity, a condition where multiple stages of social change collide rather than replace one another creating pressure instead of balance (Chakrabarty, 2000). Anthony Giddens' idea of runaway modernity helps make sense of this pattern, as it highlights how human-made systems gain momentum beyond social control, a dynamic clearly visible in India where economic reform, digital governance and media expansion often outpace regulation and ethical debate (Giddens, 1999).

Ulrich Beck's insight that modern risks are socially produced rather than external further sharpens the picture, showing how environmental damage, job insecurity and data vulnerability emerge from development itself and are unevenly distributed across social groups (Beck, 1992). The key point is not that Indian society lacks control but that control arrives late, fragmented and often reactive. Modern systems move fast. Institutions adjust slowly. The ground is uneven. This section argues that Indian society is not simply modernising but doing so under conditions of speed that magnify inequality and uncertainty producing a social landscape where change feels constant, stability feels temporary and individuals are left to navigate futures that appear open yet insecure. Too much happens at once. That is the problem.

4. The Crisis of Social Control: State, Institutions and Regulation

The idea of social control often brings to mind law, authority, regulation etc. but in contemporary Indian society control is better understood through its limits, delays and uneven presence because what stands out today is not the absence of rules but their inability to keep pace with the speed of modern change. The state still exists. Institutions still function. Laws are still written. Yet across technology, environment, labour and data, governance repeatedly arrives after damage has already been done, reacting to problems rather than shaping their direction in advance. This lag is not accidental. It is built into the way late modern systems operate where innovation, markets and digital platforms move faster than deliberation, accountability or ethical agreement, a condition that Anthony Giddens describes as central to a runaway world in which human-made systems escape steady social control (Giddens, 1999).

In India, this is visible in the rapid expansion of digital technologies that restructure communication, finance, welfare

delivery, work etc., while data protection laws, labour safeguards, accountability mechanisms struggle to keep up leaving individuals exposed to risks they did not choose and cannot easily contest. Governance gaps widen. Environmental regulation offers another clear example. Large development projects, mining, urban expansion, and infrastructure growth proceed in the name of progress often supported by policy urgency while environmental assessments, rehabilitation plans and long-term impact reviews are delayed, diluted or bypassed turning regulation into a formality rather than a protective force (Beck, 1992). Control becomes symbolic. Bureaucratic overload deepens this crisis. Indian regulatory institutions operate under heavy pressure, tasked with managing complex and fast-moving domains using procedures designed for slower times producing delay, confusion, and selective enforcement rather than consistent oversight. Files move slowly. Markets move fast. Innovation rarely waits. Law struggles to respond to the speed of change especially in areas like digital platforms, gig work, financial technologies and artificial intelligence where new practices emerge before legal categories are clearly defined forcing regulators into a cycle of catch-up that rarely closes the gap. This tension between law and speed is not unique to India but its effects are sharper in a society marked by uneven institutional capacity and deep social inequality where those with resources can navigate regulatory ambiguity while others absorb its costs.

At the same time, traditional institutions that once exercised moral authority family, community, religious leadership and local social norms have seen their influence weaken not because they vanish but because they no longer command unquestioned obedience in a world structured by choice, mobility and competing value systems (Giddens, 1991). Authority fragments. Guidance thins out. What once regulated behaviour quietly now requires explanation, negotiation or enforcement and often fails to do even that. In this space of weakened formal and moral control, new forms of regulation emerge, informal yet powerful, operating through surveillance, algorithms and market pressure rather than public accountability. Digital platforms monitor behaviour, rank performance and shape visibility producing compliance without dialogue. Markets discipline through precarity, rewarding flexibility and punishing delay. Media amplifies moral outrage creating cycles of public shaming that substitute speed for justice. Control shifts shape. It does not disappear. This fragmentation aligns closely with Ulrich Beck's argument that late

modern societies manage risk by shifting responsibility downward, placing the burden of adaptation on individuals rather than institutions, a process that creates insecurity while maintaining the appearance of choice (Beck, 1992). Zygmunt Bauman's description of liquid modernity further helps explain why control feels weak yet inescapable, as power becomes mobile, indirect and hard to confront while individuals remain fixed within systems they cannot easily exit (Bauman, 2000). In the Indian context, this liquidity interacts with long-standing hierarchies of caste, class and gender, meaning that fragmented control does not operate evenly; it follows social lines offering protection to some and exposure to others.

Manuel Castells' work on the network society adds another layer showing how power increasingly operates through networks rather than institutions, privileging speed, connection and adaptability over stability and accountability (Castells, 1996). Seen through this lens, the crisis of social control in India is not a failure of governance alone but a structural condition of runaway modernity where institutions are asked to regulate processes that no longer move at institutional speed. Control becomes reactive, responding after disruption rather than preventing it, and uneven, protecting certain interests while leaving others vulnerable. This paper argues that understanding this crisis requires moving beyond the idea that stronger control simply means more rules or faster enforcement. The problem lies deeper, in the mismatch between the tempo of modern change and the capacity of social institutions to absorb, regulate and give meaning to that change. In Indian society, this mismatch produces a condition where control is everywhere and nowhere at once, felt through pressure rather than guidance, through surveillance rather than care. It works sometimes. It fails often. And in that tension, uncertainty grows.

5. Everyday Life in a Runaway Society: Uncertainty, Anxiety and Adaptation

Everyday life in contemporary Indian society offers perhaps the clearest window into what it means to live inside a runaway world, because it is here, in ordinary routines and quiet decisions that large theories of modernity translate into pressure, worry and constant adjustment. Work is a good place to begin. For many people, especially in cities and expanding towns, employment no longer provides a stable horizon around which life can be planned; instead, it appears as a series of short-term arrangements, contracts,

platforms and informal tasks that promise flexibility but deliver insecurity, pushing individuals to remain permanently alert, available and adaptable (Standing, 2011). The future becomes difficult to imagine with confidence. Plans shrink. Anxiety grows. What once felt like a collective responsibility managed through labour laws, unions or long-term employment is now increasingly treated as a personal problem to be solved through skill-building, self-branding, constant competition. Education, which was earlier seen as a relatively clear path toward mobility has also been drawn into this logic of speed and pressure. Schools, coaching centres and universities operate in an atmosphere of relentless comparison where examinations, rankings, and outcomes arrive faster than reflection and aspiration multiplies without clear routes to fulfilment (Jeffrey, 2010). Students are told to compete harder, learn more, move faster often without corresponding expansion in opportunities producing what can be described as aspiration overload, a condition where hopes rise quickly while structural support remains thin. Failure is internalised. Stress becomes normal. Family life, too, reflects this shift. Marriage, intimacy and household arrangements are no longer regulated solely by tradition or kinship norms yet they are not fully supported by new social frameworks either leaving individuals to negotiate relationships through trial, adjustment and sometimes quiet confusion (Giddens, 1992).

Choices expand but guidance weakens. Relationships become more negotiable and more fragile at the same time. For many young people, this creates a constant balancing act between personal desire, family expectation and economic reality, a process that shapes identity formation in uncertain ways. Youth stand at the sharp edge of runaway modernity. They are encouraged to imagine limitless futures while navigating shrinking certainties around work, belonging, and recognition, a contradiction that produces frustration, restlessness, in many cases, mental strain (Arnett, 2014). Identity becomes something to be built and rebuilt often through digital spaces that amplify comparison and exposure while offering little protection from failure or rejection. Social media intensifies this experience by compressing time and attention making success and disappointment visible at the same moment and blurring the line between private emotion and public performance. Life feels watched. Judged. Measured. In this environment, religion and spirituality take on renewed significance not necessarily as rigid belief systems but as flexible resources for coping, meaning-making

and emotional grounding (Berger, 1967). Rather than disappearing under modern conditions, religious practices adapt, offering comfort, routine and moral language in a world where institutional support feels uncertain. Faith becomes personal, selective and sometimes experimental reflecting the broader pattern of reflexivity described by Anthony Giddens where individuals are required to actively construct coherence in their lives rather than inherit it ready-made (Giddens, 1991). Across these domains, a shared pattern emerges like risks that were earlier managed collectively through institutions are now shifted onto individuals, who must calculate, absorb and respond to uncertainty on their own.

Ulrich Beck's argument that late modern societies produce risks that individuals are forced to manage privately is sharply visible here, as insecurity around work, education, relationships and mental well-being becomes a normal part of daily life rather than an exceptional condition (Beck, 1992). Zygmunt Bauman's idea of liquid modernity further captures this experience, highlighting how social bonds loosen and responsibilities become individualized, leaving people free in theory but burdened in practice (Bauman, 2000). In the Indian context, this individualization unfolds unevenly shaped by class position, gender, caste and access to resources meaning that while some can buffer uncertainty through wealth or networks others face it with little support. What emerges is not a society without order but one where order is produced through self-management, emotional labour and constant adjustment rather than stable institutional care. People cope. They adapt. They endure. Yet this endurance comes at a cost, one that is often hidden in personal stress, quiet exhaustion, and the feeling that life is always slightly out of control. That feeling is not accidental. It is the everyday face of a runaway society.

6. Unequal Exposure: Risk, Inequality and Marginalized Groups

Discussions of runaway modernity often speak in general terms about speed, uncertainty and loss of control but what tends to fade into the background is a harder truth as not everyone is exposed to this runaway world in the same way, and in India, vulnerability follows old social lines even when the forces producing risk appear new. Modern change does not land on a flat surface. It moves across a society already shaped by caste hierarchy, class inequality, gendered power and sharp regional gaps, and these structures quietly decide

who absorbs risk and who is shielded from it. For upper and middle classes, uncertainty may appear as anxiety about career growth or lifestyle choices but for marginalized groups it often takes the form of direct exposure to harm, loss of livelihood, displacement and insecurity without fallback options.

Ulrich Beck's argument that modern risks are socially distributed rather than universal becomes especially visible here because the dangers created by development, technology and markets do not circulate evenly but settle more heavily on those with the least capacity to resist or recover. Caste remains central to this uneven exposure. Despite claims that modernization weakens caste, many of the risks generated by rapid economic and infrastructural change continue to be borne by Dalits and Adivasis whether through hazardous labour, informal work, environmental damage or forced displacement linked to mining, dams, and urban expansion (Deshpande, 2011). Development promises growth. Costs fall elsewhere. Class deepens this divide. Those with stable income, education and networks can manage uncertainty through savings, mobility and access to private services while the urban poor and informal workers face risk as a constant condition rather than a temporary disruption living close to loss with little institutional support (Bremner, 2016). Gender further sharpens vulnerability. Women often experience runaway modernity as a double burden, carrying the pressure of changing work expectations while remaining responsible for unpaid care and domestic stability and when systems fail, it is often women who absorb the emotional and practical cost (Connell, 2009).

Regional inequality also matters. Large parts of rural and peri-urban India encounter modern change mainly through extraction, displacement, migration rather than secure opportunity creating zones where development arrives without protection. The digital divide adds a newer layer to this unequal exposure. As governance, welfare, education and work shift onto digital platforms, access to devices, connectivity, literacy, stable infrastructure becomes a gatekeeper of rights turning technology into a filter that includes some while quietly excluding others (Nayak, 2010).

Digital systems promise neutrality but in practice they mirror and amplify existing inequalities making access conditional on resources that marginalized groups often lack. Failure to navigate technology becomes framed as personal inadequacy rather than

structural exclusion. Environmental risk offers another stark example of how runaway modernity distributes harm unevenly. Pollution, climate vulnerability and ecological degradation linked to rapid development disproportionately affect communities with the least political voice pushing them into cycles of displacement, illness and economic loss that are rarely counted as part of progress (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997). These risks are not accidents. They are produced by policy choices that privilege speed, growth and visibility over long-term protection and justice.

Anthony Giddens' idea of manufactured uncertainty helps to explain how such risks emerge from human action itself yet in the Indian case, this uncertainty is filtered through social hierarchy meaning that some groups live closer to danger while others experience modernity mainly as convenience and choice (Giddens, 1999). Zygmunt Bauman's insight that liquidity frees some while trapping others is useful here, as mobility, flexibility, and choice function as advantages for the privileged but as sources of instability for those without resources. The result is a society where risk management becomes an individual task for those least equipped to perform it, while institutions retreat or respond selectively. Who bears the cost of runaway modernity in India is therefore not an open question. It is structured. Vulnerability follows caste, class, gender and region, even as the language of development presents change as universal. This section argues that any serious engagement with runaway society must confront this unequal exposure because without addressing how risk is socially distributed, the theory remains abstract and incomplete. Speed may define modern change, but inequality decides who pays for it. That is the uncomfortable reality.

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to understand Indian society not as a case of delayed or incomplete modernity but as a social formation living inside a runaway world where the problem is not absence of change but its excess and where control struggles because the ground beneath it keeps shifting. Seen through this lens, Indian modernity appears neither smooth nor linear; it is compressed, uneven and restless, shaped by rapid market expansion, digital systems, urban growth and media speed that often move ahead of institutional capacity and ethical reflection. What runaway society reveals, above all, is that

modern change in India has not dissolved structure but rearranged it, pushing risk, uncertainty and responsibility downward while allowing systems to move upward with remarkable freedom. Control still exists but it rarely feels protective. It operates in fragments, through delayed laws, selective enforcement, market discipline, digital surveillance and moral panic, rather than through steady institutional care. This condition exposes a central limit of contemporary governance like regulation alone cannot restore control when institutions are stretched thin and trust remains uneven. Without ethical renewal and institutional strengthening, control becomes reactive rather than guiding, responding to crisis after crisis without addressing their shared roots.

Ulrich Beck's insight that modern societies increasingly manage the side effects of their own success remains deeply relevant here especially in India where development-induced risks are unevenly distributed and often absorbed by those with the least voice. Speed becomes the norm. Protection lags behind. This imbalance cannot be corrected simply by adding more rules or faster policy responses, because speed itself has become part of the problem. The findings of this study suggest the need for reflexive governance not in the narrow sense of constant policy revision but as a broader commitment to slowing down decision-making where social consequences are deep, expanding public accountability and designing regulation that recognizes inequality rather than assuming uniform capacity. Inclusive regulation matters. When digital systems, labour markets, environmental policies and welfare mechanisms are built on the assumption that all citizens can adapt equally, they quietly reproduce exclusion. A runaway society makes such assumptions dangerous.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending the idea of runaway modernity beyond its Western origins and grounding it in the lived conditions of Indian society where late modern dynamics intersect with long-standing hierarchies of caste, class, gender and region. By bringing together insights from Giddens on reflexivity and ontological insecurity, Beck on risk, Bauman on liquidity and Castells on network power, the article shows that runaway society is best understood not as a single theory but as a shared diagnosis of a world where human-made systems gain momentum faster than collective control. At the same time, the Indian case complicates this diagnosis by demonstrating how

runaway modernity operates on uneven ground intensifying vulnerability for some while offering flexibility and opportunity to others. This unevenness is not a side issue. It is central. For sociology, this means that future research on modernity must move beyond abstract accounts of speed and uncertainty and pay closer attention to how risk is distributed, resisted, and normalized in everyday life. Empirical work that listens to those living at the sharp edge of change like informal workers, migrants, students, women, marginalised communities will be crucial for understanding how runaway processes are managed from below often through quiet adaptation rather than visible resistance.

There is also a need to study emerging forms of informal control especially those operating through digital platforms and markets which shape behaviour without democratic oversight and blur the line between regulation and coercion. Finally, this paper argues that living in a runaway world demands something different from societies than constant acceleration or technical fixes. It demands social imagination, the ability to think beyond immediate gain and crisis response and responsibility, understood not as individual self-management but as collective care embedded in institutions. Speed alone will not repair the gap between change and control. Slowing down where necessary, rebuilding trust and recognising unequal exposure to risk are not signs of weakness. They are conditions for holding society together in a world that otherwise keeps running ahead.

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