

# **Covid-19 and the Aspiration of Atmanirbhar Bharat**

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COVID -19 is a disease that kills millions of people worldwide. People are suffering worldwide for better medical care and proper medicine. With the outbreak of this disease, many socio-economic and political issues have emerged globally. Every nation has its own political and socio-economic structure. During this pandemic, these structures have been badly affected. In addition, the present situation has raised many questions which need some urgent answers for a better future. India, a country with a large population and poor health system is also facing a similar situation and fighting against the COVID. There is a high probability that it will be facing deep socio-economic problems in post-COVID time. To resolve the socio-economic issues, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an economic package, Atmanirbhar Bharat, implying a path of self-reliance. The paper attempts to examine the question of how much it would be possible for India to become independent in an era of globalisation. History shows that Swadeshi gave a determination and belief in self-dependence. However, with the present economy being based on mutual dependence, the question of self-reliance becomes significant.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, India, Socio-Economic and Political condition, Swadeshi, Atmanirbhar Bharat

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Indian Prime Minister declared a new vision for the Indian economy and social development to deal with the problems expected to arise in the post-Covid period, designated as Atmanirbhar Bharat or Self-reliant India. It is noted that, "India has faced the COVID-19 situation with grit and spirit of self-reliance, that is evident in fact from zero production of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) before March 2020, India today has created a capacity of producing 2 lakh PPE kits daily, which is also growing steadily. Additionally, India has demonstrated how it rises to challenges and uncovers opportunities therein, as manifested in the re-purposing of various automobile sector industries to collaborate in making life-saving ventilators. The clarion call given by the Hon'ble PM to use these trying times to become Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) has been very well received to enable the resurgence of the Indian economy." The five pillars of Atmanirbhar Bharat focus on the economy, infrastructure, system, vibrant demography and demand. The five phases of Atmanirbhar Bharat are: Phase I- Businesses including MSMEs; Phase-II- Poor, including migrants and farmers; Phase-III- Agriculture; Phase-IV- New Horizons of Growth; Phase-V- Governments Reforms and Enables." (india.gov.in, n.d.). The current paper attempts to examine the question of how much it would be possible for India to become independent in an era of globalisation. History shows that Swadeshi gave a determination and belief in self-dependence. However, with the

present economy being based on mutual dependence, the question of self-reliance becomes significant. The paper examines the question by referring to the history of development in India

### **Atmanirbhar Bharat and Gandhi's Swaraj**

The concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat, or self-reliance, has its roots back in the Gandhian doctrine of Swadeshi. Gandhi expressed his view of Swadeshi for a strong economy, decentralisation of power in villages, encouraging the local and less industrialisation. Gandhi's view was that India's economic future lay in Charkha and Khadi. "If India's villages are to live and prosper, the charkha must become universal." (Harijan, 1939). To Gandhi, rural civilisation "is impossible without the charkha and all it implies, i.e., revival of village crafts." (1939). He also expressed that "khadi is the only true economic prosperity in terms of the millions of villages until such time, if ever, when a better system of supplying work and adequate wages for every able bodied person above the age of sixteen, male or female, is found for his field, cottage or even factory in every village of India" (Gandhi, 1936a, pp. 77-78). His suggestions for village improvement without machine use is that "[a]n intelligent plan will find the cottage method fit into the scheme for our country. Any planning in our country that ignores the absorption of labour wealth will be misplaced .... The centralized method of production, whatever may be its capacity to produce, is incapable of finding employment for as large a number of persons as we have to provide for. Therefore, it stands condemned in this country." (1939).

Gandhi was very much aware of poverty and unemployment in India. He was disappointed throughout the British rule and their exploitation. He was critical of the heavy industries; he conceived industry as the by-product of the West. The industry would increase unemployment and exploitation as well. India lives in a village, so it is most important to concentrate on the village economy with political freedom through decentralisation. Gandhi expressed that mainstream politics should not interfere in village political affairs and kept faith in indigenous institutions. He wrote, "I observed the indigenous institutions and the village panchayats hold me in this connection. India is really a republican country, and it is because it is that, that it has every shock hitherto delivered." (indiaashramsevagram, n.d.). He wrote about the causes of poverty that "much of the deep poverty of the masses is due to the ruinous departure of the deep the masses is due the ruinous departure from Swadeshi in the economic and industrial life. I think of Swadeshi not as a boycott movement undertaken by way of revenge. I conceived it as a religious principle to be followed by all. I am no economist, but I have read some treaties which show that England could easily become a self-sustained country, growing all the produce she needs." Gandhi said that "had we not abandoned Swadeshi, we need not have been in the present fallen state. If we get rid of the economic slavery, we must manufacture our cloth and, the present movement, only by hand-spinning and hand-weaving." (Gandhi, n.d., p.21) This paper reflects this Gandhian ideal of swaraj to argue the importance of current policy of Atmanirbhar Bharat, but to also explain the roadblocks in achieving self-reliance especially in a hyperglobalised independent world.

### **Political Economy of Development in India: Critical Reflections**

The Gandhian doctrine of self-reliance was highlighted through Swadeshi, a protest movement against colonial rule and the laissez-faire economy or free-market capitalism, indirectly the Western economic model. In the post-Colonial period, India took a different path of economic improvement. Moreover, unfortunately, Gandhian village reform measures were not taken earnestly, and numerous proposals of rural development acquired a place in the Directive Principle of State Policy under the Constitution of India, violation of which is non-suitable, which is a clear manifestation of marginalised the Gandhian concept of economic upliftment. Indian economic development towards industrialisation started its journey in 1950. The objective of the economic policy in 1950 was to raise per capita income in the country via industrialisation. The vehicle for this was the Nehru-Mahalanobis strategy (Patnaik, 2015). The cornerstone of the strategy was to build machines as fast as possible as capital goods were seen as a basic input in all production lines. This economy emphasised heavy industries, blending of public-private sectors, and adopting socialism and capitalism with a name of mixed economy. Agriculture was getting less priority (Janvry, 2010). The neglect of the agriculture sector resulted in low food grain production forcing the country to borrow the food grain from the US. Prominent economist Meghnath Desai elucidated about the Nehruvian economic model that the “Nehruvian approach was to grind the economy down to a low growth path.” (Desai, 2017). The neglect of agriculture through the 1950s hit the economy, ultimately failing to become a panacea. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality were not eradicated from the country.

The Green revolution of the 1960s brought essential changes to the Indian economy and made India stronger in the agricultural sector. In the predicament of shortage of food grain, the Green Revolution succeeded. “The Green Revolution has facilitated institutional and social changes in the rural areas and provided opportunities for self-sustaining economic growth and reduced poverty.” (Anderson & Hazell, 1985). Further, the government initiated many anti-poverty programs that also induced poverty reduction. With the introduction of hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers, the production level became high. Earlier problems of food grain shortage did no longer prevail after the Green Revolution. This agricultural change also changed the traditional nature of agriculture production and brought a new dimension of employment generation, especially in the rural sector. Rural development helped rural people’s commodity consumption power. The second wave of the Green revolution took place through the improvement of irrigation. Some social changes took place which subsequently had a detrimental effect on the environment after the Green revolution. The Green Revolution was criticised for promoting the commercialisation of agriculture, creating a Kulak class, and the inevitable development of class polarisation and class conflict in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> (Brass, 2008) Due to the overuse of artificial chemicals on agricultural land, land lost its natural fertility, which caused environmental degradation, and in the long run, this also escorted hazardous diseases (Rahman, 2015). In many rural areas, farmers continue to fight many fatal diseases. Unfortunately, the Green Revolution’s impact on the economy was only confined to a particular region. The deficiency of

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<sup>1</sup> The term kulak in Leninist literature refers to rich peasants and farmers who employ and exploit farm labour to whom they are also generally antagonistic.

the Green Revolution was that it failed to ensure the nation's overall development. Only a few states effectively got the Green Revolution's support for economic development, but other states failed to gain the benefits. Uneven regional development had fabricated regionalism issues accompanied by some socio-political grounds (Pakem, 2011).

Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation (LPG), a new era of an economy, was introduced in India after 1991, implying a termination of state control of the economy. Before that, the Indian economy was congested by license raj, bureaucratic dominance and redtapism. Freedom in development was limited and was under control. It was a great challenge for the nation to prevent the economy from sinking. PM Narasimha Rao made it possible to prepare the country for free foreign investment, creating opportunities for the world to have unrestricted entry. The adoption of LPG aimed to improve the Indian economy through open investment opportunities for the world, ensuring larger employment opportunities, welcoming privatisation, granting better facilities, and ensuring the country's booming economy. Revolutionary changes took place in the IT sector in larger aspects, and changes brought quality of life in the country (Chatterjee & Kar, 2018). The Indian economy started a new beginning at the expense of economic dependence on the global market. This barrierless world was not left with any conditions for self-reliance. The nation's federal structure has also become free from unitary control due to LPG. States could take self-initiatives for foreign investment. It became the state's credibility to improve its financial status. Globalisation escorted drastic transformation in infrastructure, technology and R&D sector, which was lacking previously. From rural irrigation to urban development, infrastructure changes were hugely demanded. Globalisation created space for educated labour in every sector, from the IT industry to the local industry. That accelerated infrastructure development (Ahluwalia, 2008).

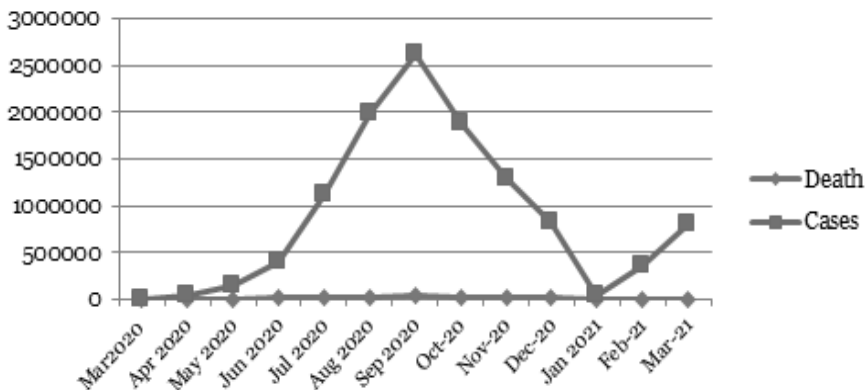
Nonetheless, Ahluwalia raises a question on the contrary, "what can we say about India's economic prospects based on this review of the past? On balance, India has clearly managed the transition from a relatively close to a more open economy fairly well. The change has been slow, but the cumulative effect of the reforms that have already taken place put the economy in a much better position today than it was 10 years ago." (Ahluwalia, 2008, p. 32) Therefore, despite all these expectations from LPG for the growth of the Indian economy, it failed to feed the grass-root economic development. Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation have opened the mouth of development through competition; the resulting effect was the reduced role of the state in playing its welfare role in the economy; the economy is free from control but controlled by the global market. The destiny of local markets has been dominated by global fate. To some extent, the state is now losing its sovereignty (Cable, 1995). This economic system defeats the aim of complete economic enhancement. Poverty in the agriculture sector prevails, regional imbalances have not changed, small scale industries are collapsing, and the rural economy is subsiding. Multinational companies want to build up industries without taking into consideration the environmental impact (Shah, 2005; European Environmental Agency, n.d.; Patnaik, 2017). Minimum state intervention, unfair competition from MNCs damaged the market and scope of local industries and their business structure. The number of landless labourers is also increasing in rural areas. Resource draining

and brain drain have become more than common after adopting the new economic policy. MNCs are searching for cheap labour, and unskilled labour is available in developing countries like India, so labourers are exploited. The gap between poor and rich is becoming larger, especially in Third World countries, and India is also no exception. Amartya Sen said in this context, “The troubling inequalities include disparities in affluence and also gross asymmetries in political, social and economic opportunities and power. The crucial question concerns the sharing of the potential gains from globalisation-between rich and poor countries and among different groups within a country.” (Sen, 2002). Globalisation also has some cultural impact. It is now clear that through globalisation, cultural hegemony has started.

### COVID-19 and Challenges to Development in India

COVID-19 emerged as a disease caused by Coronavirus, which started infecting people worldwide in 2020. This virus is now a common name with people suffering globally from this virus. The definite source of the virus's origin is still unknown to the world and the researchers are working their level best to discover the medicine. Graph of infection is rising day by day in India, people are losing their lives, and the country is tolerating an acute economic crisis.

**FIGURE 1.** Graph showing the rising of COVID cases in India



Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/>

COVID-19 has sharply affected lower and middle-income groups. India is the first Asian country to declare a “lockdown” to protect the people from spreading the disease. The consequence was a terrible economic deficiency. From large industries to the agricultural sector, all were expected to suffer financial damage. Consequently, it was anticipated that the number of unwaged would increase on a large scale. It was also predicted that no further growth would be economically encouraged in near the coming two years in India. “The World Bank and rating agencies had initially revised India’s growth rate for the financial year 2021 with the lowest figures India has seen in three decades since India’s economic liberalisation in the 1990s. On 26 May CRISIL announced that this will perhaps be India’s worst recession since independence.” (2021) The Government of India took the initiative to improve the nation’s economic interest by adopting different types

of financial measures. Economic aid for the poor, free cash dispensation, rationing for the poor, and tax relaxation from the major industries are the important steps taken by the government (Dev & Sengupta, 2020). However, the country has been distressed about the post-COVID economic conditions, the solution to which was PM Modi's mantra of Atmanirbhar Bharat, or self-reliant India aiming to reduce dependence and boost the local industries by uncurving the employment sectors. Gandhi's and Nehru's Self-Reliant in this globalised India is not exactly possible, but their philosophy would show the road toward the path of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

### **Questions to the Atmanirbhar Economic Package**

India has a good market, which is still not fully utilised for domestic purposes. This pandemic situation shows how the Indian economy is fighting during the crisis period to survive. Underdeveloped rural India is bound to change their livelihood from agriculture to unorganised labour in cities. Changing subsistence of the rural population clearly shows that the village economy is declining day by day. Alongside, the agrarian crisis is looming in the rural side which began even before Covid-19. Around 60 per cent of the rural households are at the verge of income loss and unemployment. (Reddy & Mamgain, 2020). The post COVID-19 scenario is expected to be more devastating. It is estimated that many people would lose their jobs, and the national GDP rate might touch even 0 (India Today, 2020). In these circumstances, the Government should take decisive steps to revive economic development. Subsequently, on May 12, the Government announced a new economic policy known as Atmanirbhar Bharat or Self-reliant India. The major focal areas of the policy are agriculture, education, technology and innovation, and human capital (Times of India, 2020). Atmanirbhar Bharat has emphasised the importance of local and regional levels. To enhance the operationalisation of this policy, one needs to have thorough insights into the problems plaguing the Indian economy and the prospects. Opportunities are here in India but they require special attention in every corner of economic development. And attention must be given to rural sectors especially in the backdrop of increasing return migration of labourers from cities like Delhi back to the rural side (Sing, 2020). These unskilled labourers lost their jobs, with a majority engaged in unorganised sectors; the inverse migration of this labourers to the rural side has created tremendous pressure on the rural economy. Simultaneously in cities, small business persons and private employees suddenly became economically shapeless. As a response, Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan announced - free food grain supply to migrants for two months, one nation one ration Card, schemes for affordable rental housing complexes for migrant workers etc. Post-COVID period alternative employment is inevitable. At present the economy needs some deep-rooted solution. Consequently, it is significant that domestic products and manufacturing demand its best niche.

The drawbacks of the Indian economy now could work positively as a game-changer. The major economic drawbacks in India are "low level of national income and per capita income, vast inequalities in income and wealth, predominance of agriculture, tremendous population pressure, massive unemployment" (Jhingan, 2011). Among all these, the low level of national and per capita income can be diminished by thorough economic improvement with the help of the existing unemployed labour, and massive unemployment will automatically disappear. The challenge here is the continuing ignorance of agriculture despite India being an

agricultural nation, and priorities have been given to the heavy industries. Industries allied with agriculture are also not promoted. Hence agricultural unemployment has increased gradually. Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan has paid attention to the agriculture sector to eradicate all the hindrances to agricultural development. Proper implementation of new agricultural norms can revert the economy to the agricultural field.

If we consider other sectors of the economy, India is an owner of an excellent market for business, which has been the world's favourite destination since the colonial period, especially for the rich European countries to sell their products. A new economic environment with Atmanirbhar Bharat expected would encourage the global market soon. Agricultural product export is more important than industrial development, accompanied by a minimal dependency on imports. India is famous for its vibrant demography. Now the time has arrived for utilising the huge population productively. After adopting globalisation, India has produced and supplied the human resources for the world. This human capital could be used for domestic economic improvement and Atmanirbhar Bharat is showing the destination. Before this revolutionary thought of self-reliance in this globalised era, India was treated as economic waste because of inequalities in human capital. Nutrition, education and training are the basis for human capital development. On the other hand, a poor and an unhealthy population cannot constitute a good human resource. Proper education and dropout reduction can convert unskilled labour into skilled and useful labour. Emphasis should be given to small-scale industries and cottage industries. It is also important to protect indigenous farming and industries. For the dying local companies, it is important to gather the government's helping hand with subsidies. More effort to create skilled labourers would help to reduce the problem of unemployment. Marshall regarded education "as a national investment and the most valuable of all capital is that investment in human beings." No doubt that India is credited with excellent grades in the education sector (Parida & Nayak, 2009, p. 11). Apart from that, the country has shown its non-dependence on the defence sector. The country is ready to produce a high technological armoury with its technology. After the lockdown, the worst picture of the unorganized sector's economy was revealed. In that situation, Indian IT sectors have stretched their helping hands to discover alternative opportunities for the jobless migrated labourers. In the health sector, India is dependent on raw materials for producing medicines (Jayaswal, 2020). Now through the investment in medical plant farming, India can reduce the dependence and become a supplier. Concurrently emphasis must be given to alternative medical sectors, especially Ayurveda and Naturotherapy. Self-reliant India needs to develop the supply chain from the local places. In this regard, Atmanirbhar Bharat requires strong support and command of the Government in Public Sector Undertakings.

To meet the real Atma Nirbhar Bharat, India has to give time. Poverty, inequality, economic concentration etc., need a holistic reform. The established popular industrial houses primarily enjoy better economic facilities. The time has come to engage with small industries with minimum labours which have been historically ignored. With improved governmental intervention including government sponsored technological improvements, these small industries can be saved to an extent. Rural India cannot enjoy the technological facilities in their daily life and economic sector due to income disparities and proper knowledge alongside a lack

of proper infrastructure. Initially, without cash support, people cannot return to the normal economic environment. Purchasing and buying capacities will play a key role in this regard. The victory of Atmanirbhar Bharat depends upon the socio-political system of the country. Administrative reluctance, corruption, illiteracy, parochial social structures etc., are the major barriers to the achievement of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

### **Conclusion**

It can be said that self-reliance does not mean the process of deglobalisation. Self-reliance is the lesson for reducing dependence, creating self-sufficiency in the domestic sphere, and extending a hand to the world. COVID-19 taught the world the lesson of Atmanirbhar or Self-reliance. The advantages and benefits of globalisation cannot be ignored. At the same time, the disadvantages of globalisation are now dominating. Specifically, the third world countries are suffering the drawbacks. This detrimental effect of globalisation on developing countries like India is uneven competition. The government has lost control over the market economy. The downcast nature of the economy made the poor poorer. India is still carrying the demerits of globalisation and a damaged economy. Growing economic inequalities became more widespread. The disadvantages of globalisation have shown the way to be self-reliant by reducing the dependence. The market is a significant factor in the global economy. It is an open secret that the Southern part of the world is a favourite business destination for population growth, massive demand and vast market.

Nevertheless, domestic products are deprived and struggling, waiting for a proper plan to exploit the same market. In this way, the local market could be economically spirited. Furthermore, it will improve the domestic financial crisis. This global pandemic has shown how over-dependence harms developing nations and worsens the economy. Post pandemic world is expecting outstanding economic debt. Industries dependent on foreign nations for finance or raw materials have faced the most criticalities. Deglobalisation cannot be the solution to revive economic prosperity. Moreover, the idea of self-reliance is not all about the negation of globalisation. The reduction of dependence is the only logic behind the theory of self-reliance. The Gandhian Swadeshi movement was the first movement of self-reliance in India. The Swadeshi movement already revealed that India is a self-sufficient country. The Indian economy procured good status in the post-independence period. This economic prosperity has ignored the importance of the village economy, lost touch with local products, forgotten the importance of small scale business and disregard the significance of the local market, which is the most favourable destination for Western Countries. Atma Nirbhar, or self-reliance, is not a contradiction to globalisation. In the post-globalised world, local politics is now a part of global politics. That politics is shaping the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the globe also. It is challenging to disregard the positive performance of globalisation. With the acceptance of challenges, even the developing nations are also benefiting from the fruits of globalisation. The inconvenience of globalisation can be erased through Atmanirbhar or self-reliance. Through the idea of believing in local politics, Atmanirbhar is ready to represent itself as a part of global politics. National Policies should initiate in favour of the domestic economy. Self-reliance will get successful with the investment in the domestic market.



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