

Self-Reliance to Atmanirbhar Bharat: A Gandhian Reading

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Abstract

The contemporary Indian narrative of Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India), launched in 2020 amid the COVID-19 shock, appears as an economic and strategic imperative shaped by globalization and technological aspirations. Yet, its normative foundation echoes Mahatma Gandhi's century-old blueprint of self-rule rooted in Swadeshi, decentralization, and ethical economics. Gandhi argued that real independence is unattainable without economic autonomy, moral self-control, and village empowerment—principles expressed through khadi, trusteeship, bread labour, and Gram Swaraj. This research paper critically rereads Atmanirbhar Bharat through a Gandhian ideological lens to assess continuity and divergence. Using textual analysis, contemporary policy review, and philosophical interpretation, it argues that the Atmanirbhar moment is not merely political rhetoric but a modern re-articulation of Gandhian economic vision adapted to global supply chains, digital innovation, and competitive statecraft. However, differences remain: while Gandhi foregrounded moral transformation, trusteeship, sustainability, and village republics, policy implementation today tends to prioritise production, markets, and competitiveness. The Gandhian paradigm thus offers both critique and direction for India's developmental future, positioning self-reliance as a civilizational idea rather than a temporary economic strategy.

Keywords

Self-reliance, Swadeshi, Gandhi, Atmanirbhar Bharat, decentralization, trusteeship, Gram Swaraj

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Introduction

The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self-Reliant India Mission), launched by the Government of India in May 2020, is a visionary initiative aimed at transforming India into a self-sustaining and resilient economy. Envisioned during the COVID-19 pandemic, the mission emphasizes reducing dependence on foreign goods, strengthening local industries, enhancing domestic production, and promoting innovation across key sectors. While modern in approach, the core philosophy of Atmanirbhar Bharat echoes the Swadeshi movement led by Mahatma Gandhi during India's freedom struggle—a movement that called for economic self-reliance, rural empowerment, and the revival of indigenous industries. Atmanirbhar Bharat is built on five key pillars: economy, infrastructure, system (technology-driven), vibrant demography, and demand. It aims not just at import substitution, but at creating globally competitive domestic industries. The mission supports sectors such as agriculture, MSMEs, textiles, electronics, and healthcare, while also encouraging entrepreneurship, local manufacturing, and digital transformation. This national mission draws a clear philosophical parallel with Gandhiji's Swadeshi ideology, which he described not merely as a boycott of foreign goods, but as a broader movement of self-dependence, village-centric economy, and ethical consumption. For Gandhi, economic self-rule was as essential as political independence. He promoted khadi (handspun cloth) as a symbol of Swadeshi and urged Indians to produce and use indigenous goods to weaken the colonial economic hold.

In the current globalized context, Atmanirbhar Bharat reinterprets Swadeshi to suit the aspirations of a 21st-century India. While Gandhi's Swadeshi was largely about rural self-sufficiency and anti-colonial resistance, Atmanirbhar Bharat is about economic resilience, reducing strategic dependencies, and becoming an active player in global supply chains. However, both ideologies converge on the idea that economic independence is vital for true national sovereignty. Moreover, both emphasize local empowerment. Gandhiji focused on gram swaraj—strengthening villages as self-sufficient units. Today, the government promotes “Vocal for Local”, encouraging citizens to support local producers, artisans, and start-ups. The vision is to make Indian villages and towns economically vibrant, thereby reducing migration, ensuring inclusive development, and preserving cultural heritage—much like Gandhi envisioned. The emphasis on MSMEs under Atmanirbhar Bharat, rural employment through schemes like MGNREGA, and promotion of traditional industries align with Gandhi's ideal of self-sufficient rural economies. Additionally, the push for eco-friendly practices, sustainability, and skill-based development also resonates with Gandhi's holistic vision of development rooted in ethics and simplicity.

“Reimagining Gandhian Self-Reliance in the Age of Atmanirbhar Bharat”

The contemporary discourse on Atmanirbhar Bharat has revived interest in older intellectual and ethical traditions of self-reliance—most notably, the Gandhian formulation of Swaraj and village-centred autonomy. At first glance, Atmanirbhar Bharat appears as a macro-economic initiative emphasizing global competitiveness, production efficiency, resilient supply chains, MSME strengthening, technological innovation, and a reduced dependence on external markets. However, beneath this performance-driven framework lies an intuitive resonance with Gandhi’s idea of self-reliance, albeit expressed in new developmental language. Gandhi’s conception of Swaraj was rooted in decentralization, moral accountability, human dignity, and the education of individuals as responsible agents in society. Today’s push for local-to-vocal production, entrepreneurship promotion, skill development missions, and rural livelihood programmes can be seen as policy-level reinterpretations of this ethical philosophy—although contemporary policy rarely articulates its moral underpinnings as Gandhi did. The shift towards strengthening MSMEs mirrors Gandhi’s insistence on non-industrial, labour-centred development as the core of national economic strength. Similarly, the emphasis on village cluster industries, cooperative models, SHGs, start-up incubation in tier-II and tier-III towns, and the digitalization of grassroots commerce reflects the enduring logic of Gandhian decentralization, now dressed in the vocabulary of digital India and innovation.

Nevertheless, reimagining Gandhian self-reliance demands more than thematic parallels; it requires interrogating what may be missing in contemporary frameworks. Gandhi saw self-reliance not merely as productive independence but as a moral revolution—a transformation of desires, consumption choices, and social relations. Atmanirbhar Bharat predominantly focuses on scaling output, expanding domestic capacity, and enhancing global competitiveness. While necessary for a 21st-century economy, these objectives risk sidelining the deeper ethical strands of Gandhi’s thought: simplicity, restraint, community solidarity, and the prioritization of the weakest. For Atmanirbhar Bharat to meaningfully draw from Gandhian principles, it must foreground inclusiveness, rural equity, ecological stewardship, and dignity of labour over market metrics alone. It must simultaneously address structural inequalities—gender, caste, and regional disparities—that Gandhi insisted were incompatible with genuine Swaraj. Encouragingly, elements of Gandhian spirit can be seen in programmes like Mission LiFE, the promotion of organic and sustainable agriculture, support for women-led SHGs, and the shift towards circular economy models. Yet, a fuller integration would require rebalancing technological ambition with ethical reflection—asking not just how India becomes competitive, but how it becomes more humane.

Thus, reimagining Gandhian self-reliance in the age of Atmanirbhar Bharat is ultimately an exercise in harmonizing two visions: one of self-strengthening through economic capability, and the other of self-governance rooted in values, justice, and community empowerment. The future of Indian development depends not on choosing between them but on integrating them. A truly Gandhian Atmanirbhar Bharat would be one where innovation coexists with compassion, industrial growth supports rural livelihoods, entrepreneurship serves societal wellbeing, and national pride is inseparable from social responsibility. In this synthesis lies the possibility of a self-reliant India that is not merely prosperous but also equitable, ethical, and profoundly human.

From Swadeshi to “Vocal for Local”: Philosophical Parallels

The philosophical continuity between Gandhi’s Swadeshi and the contemporary “Vocal for Local” campaign under Atmanirbhar Bharat is striking. Gandhi conceptualized Swadeshi as an ethical method of nation-building rooted in self-respect, moral discipline, and collective responsibility. It was not a passive withdrawal from foreign goods but an active participation in domestic production, particularly through manual labour such as spinning khadi. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi asserts that Swadeshi aims to “serve our immediate surroundings before we seek to convert the world” (Gandhi 87). The movement sought not merely economic substitution but psychological liberation—the reconstruction of confidence among India’s rural producers and artisans.

The twenty-first-century policy slogan “Vocal for Local” embodies parallel motivations. It encourages consumers to prioritise Indian products, promotes indigenous entrepreneurship, and supports handicrafts, start-ups, farm-based industries, and self-help collectives. The goal is again to shift domestic markets toward internal capacity development, reduce dependency on imports, and nurture local innovation. The increased focus on local supply chains, khadi modernization, GeM procurement for MSMEs, ODOP (One District One Product) campaigns, and cluster-based rural industries showcase this shift. However, differences emerge in ideological thrust. Gandhi perceived Swadeshi as a moral revolution, whereas Vocal for Local operates primarily as an economic stimulus strategy. Gandhi foregrounded simplicity, human labour, and distributive justice, whereas contemporary frameworks emphasise technology, brand value, and global competitiveness. Still, both share common ground in psychological economics—changing consumer mindsets to privilege locality, solidarity, and identity.

Thus, Vocal for Local can be interpreted as a modern translation of Swadeshi, adapted to a global marketplace where self-reliance implies not isolation but

resilience within supply networks. The challenge lies in integrating Gandhi's ethical core into policy homework: consumer awareness must blend with sustainability, fair wages, and cultural continuity rather than become a profit-driven nationalism.

Gram Swaraj and Contemporary Rural Development

Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj foregrounded autonomous, self-sufficient village republics where people would govern their economic and political affairs. Gandhi saw the village as the "centre of life," capable of nurturing cooperation, discipline, and responsibility (Parekh 47). He argued that true democracy cannot emerge through external authority but through local capacity, shared labour, and participatory decision-making. Today, Atmanirbhar Bharat re-engages elements of this framework through rural development policies. Government interventions such as MGNREGA, Deendayal Rural Skills Mission, SHG federations under NRLM, Panchayati Raj strengthening, FPO promotion, and rural digital service delivery seek to revitalize local capacity. The ethos of these initiatives aligns with what Gandhi imagined: restoring economic dignity to villages, decentralizing production, and reducing involuntary migration. Yet, divergences exist. Gram Swaraj was fundamentally political autonomy—villages exercising sovereign authority in education, sanitation, trade, and justice. Contemporary decentralization remains largely administrative, heavily regulated by bureaucracy and higher tiers of government. The Panchayati Raj system provides representation but not complete autonomy. Gandhi's belief in village moral government contrasts with the technocratic, scheme-driven model of modern policy. Nonetheless, the Gandhian spirit persists. When rural women emerge as entrepreneurs through SHGs, when khadi regains market space, or when digital panchayats enhance transparency, fragments of Gram Swaraj's living philosophy surface. Gandhi's insistence that villages should not be abandoned but strengthened offers sobering relevance against growing urban congestion and agrarian crisis.

"Towards Harmony: Aligning Gandhian Moral Vision with Modern Self-Reliance Policy"

The pursuit of self-reliance in contemporary India provides fertile ground for revisiting Gandhi's moral and socio-economic philosophy, not as a nostalgic ideal but as a framework capable of enriching present-day policy directions. Modern dialogues on self-reliance, exemplified by initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, focus on building industrial capacity, advancing innovation, empowering start-ups, reforming supply chains, and reducing external dependencies. These goals are essential for national resilience in a global economy; however, they risk becoming technocratic unless informed by ethical values and people-centred development.

Gandhi's vision, rooted in simplicity, decentralization, dignity of labour, and the upliftment of the weakest, complements this policy agenda by asserting that self-reliance is incomplete without justice, community, and sustainability. Aligning the two visions invites a harmonization where economic competitiveness is balanced with moral responsibility. For example, today's emphasis on MSMEs, cluster-based industries, rural livelihoods, and local manufacturing echoes Gandhi's faith in small-scale production and village-based autonomy. Similarly, contemporary campaigns such as "vocal for local," organic farming promotion, skill development missions, and women-led self-help movements demonstrate implicit Gandhian influences, even if articulated through market language rather than spiritual vocabulary.

Yet, bringing Gandhi meaningfully into the policy conversation requires moving beyond superficial parallels. Gandhi's self-reliance was not only about production but about transforming consciousness—reorienting society towards restraint, compassion, interdependence, and ethical consumption. Present-day self-reliance frameworks must therefore internalize concerns that Gandhi held central: ecological balance, equitable opportunity, humility in growth, and protection of the vulnerable. This alignment demands institutional reforms that embed human dignity into development—such as mandating fair labour practices, prioritizing rural infrastructure, enabling community participation in planning, and ensuring distributive justice in access to credit, technology, and markets. It also requires a cultural shift where self-reliance is interpreted not merely as economic independence but as responsible citizenship and moral accountability. Achieving harmony between Gandhian ethics and modern policy thus involves re-conceptualizing growth as a means to social wellbeing rather than an end in itself. When innovation is linked with inclusion, and competitiveness serves community upliftment, self-reliance evolves from a state-driven agenda into a shared social ethos. In this synthesis lies the potential for a more humane model of national development—one where India's quest for global stature is grounded in compassion, sustainability, and justice, fulfilling not only the pragmatic needs of the present but also the moral aspirations that Gandhi envisioned.

Policy Implications of Gandhian Rereading

A Gandhian rereading of Atmanirbhar Bharat encourages four actionable directions:

- 1. Deepening Trusteeship Ethics:** CSR must evolve from compliance to conscience—firms reinvesting profits in workers, ecology, craft heritage, and marginalized communities.

2. **Strengthening Panchayati Autonomy:** Gram Swaraj teaches that empowerment cannot be outsourced; rural India needs fiscal freedom, training, participatory planning, and decentralized authority.
3. **Reviving Knowledge Systems:** Indigenous farming, handloom culture, folk manufacturing, and women’s cooperatives must be systematically nurtured—not merely symbolized.
4. **Re-orienting Consumption Culture:** Education and media must cultivate ethical citizenship—buying responsibly, repairing rather than replacing, supporting artisans, valuing sustainability over glamour.

Such a rereading shifts Atmanirbhar Bharat from policy to ethical nation-building.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Gandhian economic thought and the concept of self-reliance constitute a profound civilizational philosophy that continues to illuminate India’s development discourse. Gandhi envisioned an economic order rooted not merely in production, profit, or technological advancement but in ethics, human dignity, decentralization, and social justice. His insistence that true swaraj is incomplete without *atma-nirbharta* underscores that freedom is meaningful only when people, communities, and nations can sustain themselves with dignity and autonomy. While the world raced towards industrial modernity, Gandhi courageously articulated an alternative that privileged small-scale production, manual labour, local empowerment, and moral restraint—an approach widely dismissed in his time but increasingly recognized today as ecologically sensible, socially cohesive, and spiritually elevating. In the context of India’s current pursuit of Atmanirbhar Bharat, Gandhian thought offers not merely historical resonance but actionable guidance. The emphasis on “Vocal for Local,” revival of MSMEs, promotion of traditional crafts, rural employment guarantees, sustainability, and self-help collectives reflect the continuing imprint of Gandhian values on policy imagination. Yet, the essence of Gandhi’s message lies deeper than programmatic similarity; it lies in the conviction that development must uplift the weakest, reduce inequality, respect nature, and cultivate a moral economy.

Today’s self-reliance discourse focuses heavily on global competitiveness, technological leadership, supply chain resilience, and national security. Gandhi would not reject these aspirations, but he would caution that self-reliance devoid of ethical transformation and community empowerment risks reproducing new hierarchies and dependencies. His framework reminds us that decentralization is not merely an administrative ideal but a lived practice that enhances participation, dignity, and local capability. Gandhi’s village republic continues to challenge policymakers to rethink

over-urbanization, homogenized development, and concentration of wealth. Likewise, trusteeship offers a compelling critique of unregulated capitalism, inviting modern industry to view wealth as a responsibility rather than an entitlement. In a century marked by climate crises, material consumerism, unemployment, and social fragmentation, Gandhi's prescription of simple living, mindful production, and cooperative economics acquires renewed urgency. Ultimately, Gandhian self-reliance is not a nostalgic return to the past but a forward-looking proposition grounded in sustainability, human values, and democratic empowerment. As India moves from political freedom to economic self-assertion, Gandhi provides a compass to ensure that self-reliance does not become exclusionary or exploitative but evolves into inclusive, ethical, and socially rooted nation-building. His legacy implies that a truly Atmanirbhar Bharat must not only produce more—it must produce rightly; it must not only innovate—it must innovate with compassion and responsibility. Gandhi's economic vision thus remains a living philosophy, offering both critique and inspiration for India's transformative journey towards a resilient, just, and humane future.

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