

Modi, the RSS and a Self-Reliant India

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Summary

On 12 May 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a substantial economic package to resuscitate India's struggling economy. Besides the money that was committed to reviving the economy hit hard by the pandemic, Modi also launched the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' (Self-Reliant India campaign). While some fear Modi's vision signals a shift towards protectionism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has welcomed the move as the focus on local industry and indigenous modes of production resonates with its ideology of 'swadeshi'. This emphasis on 'self-reliance' could accelerate amidst the deepening hostilities with China. This paper looks at the extent to which Modi's vision is in consonance with the RSS' thinking.

Introduction

A few days before the national lockdown in India was relaxed, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the nation for the third time on 12 May 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the main item of the speech was the announcement of a ₹20 crore (S\$376 billion) economic package to revive the economy, a critical aspect of the speech was the emphasis on self-reliance and the unveiling of the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' (Self-Reliant India campaign). He said a self-reliant or *atmanirbhar* India will stand on five pillars — the economy, infrastructure, technology-driven system, demography and demand.

While this has raised fears that India will turn inwards and become protectionist, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman later clarified that an *atmanirbhar* or self-reliant India will "integrate not isolate". While different versions of self-reliance have been proposed in India over the years, *swadeshi* or indigenous modes of production has been one of the key aspects of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) ideology. This paper looks at the extent to which Modi's vision is in agreement with the RSS' thinking on this matter. It does so by looking at some of the recent writings and commentary on the issue in the two RSS journals: *Organiser* and *Panchjanya*.

Views in the RSS Journals

A few days before Modi's speech, the 10 May 2020 issue of the *Organiser* carried a cover story on the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's online address (Bouddhik Varg) to his followers on the pandemic and his organisation's role. The three things that he emphasised were *Seva*, *Swadeshi* and *Swavalamban* (Service, Swadeshi and Self-Reliance). On self-reliance, he said, "Self-reliance is the new mantra of development which implies [an] economic system that is employable, energy efficient, and environment-friendly — this will be next stage of national reconstruction; even during the crisis some fundamental truths are being tested. We should

also take the project of national reconstruction with the fundamental principle of self-reliance.”¹

In the next issue of the *Organiser* (17 May 2020), Manmohan Vaidya, joint general secretary of the RSS, in an article titled ‘*Reinventing Bharat*’ wrote about the idea of *swadeshi* and its link to globalisation, “For every nation, production and promotion of indigenous (*swadeshi*) products is necessary. The ‘one size fits all’ approach of globalization isn’t suitable for everybody as trade is subject to variations according to cultures, priorities, laws and regulations. Mutually accepted, complementary and cooperative economic agreements between countries are a far better model.”²

The cover story of the 24 May 2020 issue of the *Organiser* was also devoted to self-reliance. An article by Pramod Kumar analysed different aspects of the government’s economic package and praised it for materialising the “dream” of a “self-reliant Bharat” as well as representing a “tectonic shift” in the development model followed in India.³ It also carried the views of the RSS ideologue S Gurumurthy on *swadeshi* who claimed that it was already “a functioning model” with “communities and families running businesses all over India”. He added that the entire world was moving towards a “protective model”.⁴

During this period, the Hindi language journal of the RSS, *Panchajanya*, also carried several articles on self-reliance. On 24 May 2020, *Panchajanya*’s issue expanded on major concerns of the RSS, such as employability and livelihood, the promotion of indigenous products and a shift away from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model of globalisation towards economic growth more culturally attuned to Indian society. Discrepancies in employment opportunities between urban and rural areas and competition with China were also discussed.

In the editor’s note of the issue, Hitesh Kumar came out in strong praise of Modi’s economic package. He stated that it provided the country with a new direction of policy thinking on par with the policies which had opened up India’s economy in 1991, and went on to say that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s transparency and honesty in its business dealings, efficient welfare schemes and generous, class-sensitive approach to the crisis had led to trust and enthusiasm in various corners of the economy. He singled out the production of PPE kits as an example *swadeshi* innovation and praised the “mutual trust between the BJP government and society”.⁵

¹ “We all have a role to play in converting corona crisis into opportunity”, *Organiser*, vol. 71, no. 46, 10 May 2020. <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-02&page=6>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

² Dr Manmohan Vaidya, “Reinventing Bharat”, *Organiser*, vol. 71, no. 47, 17 May 2020. <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-09&page=28>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

³ Pramod Kumar, “In search of Self-Reliance”, *Organiser*, vol. 71, no. 48, 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=6>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

⁴ Prashanth Vaidyaraj, “Swadeshi is Bharat’s functional model, Recognise this at the institutional level – S Gurumurthy”, *Organiser*, vol. 71, no. 48, 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=10>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

⁵ Hitesh Kumar, “Aafat Ki Kaat Aatmanirbharata”, *Panchjanya*, 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.panchjanya.com/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=4>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

In the issue's cover story, '*Svavalamban Ka Sankalp*' (The Resolve of Self-Reliance), Bhagvati Prakash argued that though before independence India was able to produce major commodities, in the next four decades, enterprises were not given enough freedom. Subsequently, liberalisation introduced its own problems when imports and foreign direct investment (FDI) incentives thwarted the growth of local businesses. He believes Modi's self-reliant India will create not only an "epoch-making leap in ... development" but will also make development humane and inclusive.⁶

In another article '*Nai Subah Ki Raah*' (Path to a New Dawn), Umeshvar Kumar complimented this human-centric focus by locating the turn to self-reliance as part of an existing but accelerating shift in the global order. He characterises 'Make in India' and 'Make in USA' as two attempts to rectify imbalances in the global free trade system vis-à-vis China. Criticising both the 'gross individualism' of United States capitalism and the "inhuman economic policies" of China, he argues that "one after the other the principles of the global system are proving unsuccessful".⁷ The solution, according to him, is to follow Hindu nationalist ideologue Deendayal Upadhyaya's theory of Integral Humanism, where policy – making is "according to circumstantial needs, in consideration for the society, country, and times".⁸

Kumar underscores that 'Integral Humanism' – which underscores elements of *swadeshi*, localisation, societal orientation and the environment – is a 'practical doctrine' on which the government is quickly moving. He proposes that one lesson from the COVID-19 crisis is the need to address the bottlenecks of industrial production, labour and geographical disparities in employment and other benefits.

Like the *Organiser*, *Panchjanya* quotes at length from an interview with Gurumurthy. In answer to a question about why the Modi government's 'Make in India' initiative has struggled, he explained that the policy is lacking in teeth but suggests this may change if local industries enhance their participation in production. Responding to a question about the crisis of migrant labour, he predicted that safety and human lives, rather than cheap prices, will play an increasing role in economic thinking.⁹

Many of these views are restating the views of RSS ideologue and founder of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, Dattopant Thengadi. In his *Third Way*, published in the 1990s, Thengadi had written "[p]roponents of *swadeshi* are not prepared to endorse the view that the western paradigm is the universal model of progress and development worthy of being followed by all the people of the world. People have their own distinct culture and the model of progress and development for each country should be consistent with its own cultural

⁶ Bhagvati Prakash, "Svavalamban Ka Sankalp", *Panchjanya*, 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.panchjanya.com/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=13>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

⁷ Umeshvar Kumar, "Nai Subah Ki Raat", 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.panchjanya.com/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=6>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Panchjanya Bureau, "Desh mein swadeshi model safalatapurvak kaam kar rahaa hai", 24 May 2020. <https://epaper.panchjanya.com/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-05-16&page=14>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

ethos. Westernisation is not modernisation.”¹⁰ Some of these ideas were taken up by M G Bokare, former vice-chancellor of Nagpur University (where the RSS is headquartered), in his *Hindu Economics*.

Decoding Self-Reliance

Broadly speaking, Modi’s vision of self-reliance appears in accordance with the RSS in the basic understanding that the framework that had once governed globalisation has undergone a shift from the ‘one-size-fits-all’ model to a more contextual one. During his 12 May 2020 speech, Modi suggested that the government has a “duty” to implement more inclusive economic policies that take into account the wellbeing of vulnerable citizens and their financial requirements. He spoke about enhancing domestic demand and increasing indigenous production to realise the new goal of becoming “vocal for local”. This would require empowering “every stake-holder in our supply chain”, particularly micro, small and medium enterprises.¹¹

Compared to the RSS, however, Modi is relatively more vague in his policy prescriptions. This has contributed to uncertainty on whether Modi is turning to protectionism and the import-substitution based model of the past. It could be argued that Modi’s new self-reliant India is not substantially different from visions of a prosperous India that he has previously articulated. The pillars of Modi’s self-reliance – economy, infrastructure, system, demography, and demand – do not differ greatly from the pillars on which the BJP plans to make India a US\$5 trillion (₹5.95 trillion) economy. Much of the rhetoric around self-reliance and *swadeshi*, therefore, can partially be viewed as old wine in a new bottle.

Modi is also seeking to enhance India’s domestic capabilities to make it an attractive destination for FDI, which is important in his vision of making India a manufacturing hub and to create jobs. This was the objective of the ‘Make in India’ campaign, a much-publicised initiative in Modi’s first term, which arguably did not take off as anticipated. However, the RSS has long been sceptical of globalisation and FDI. So, at least at the level of rhetoric, one can see Modi attempting to address the RSS’ concerns about welfare and labour, which has gained new traction during the pandemic, and ramp up India’s indigenous capability. In what appears a direct nod to the RSS, Modi alluded to “the debate between Human Centric Globalization vs. Economy Centralized Globalization.”¹²

This might also be seen in the context of *Vasudeva Kutumbakam* (The World is One Family), which is often used by Modi in international fora. The RSS’ Dattareya Hosabale, in an interaction with the foreign media, a week before Modi’s 12 May 2020 speech, put forth this idea. Hosabale had said, “Though technologically and at the level of consciousness,

¹⁰ Arun Anand, “How Modi govt’s push for self-reliance is inspired by RSS model of swadeshi economics”, *The Print*, 14 May 2020. <https://theprint.in/economy/how-modi-govts-push-for-self-reliance-is-inspired-by-rss-model-of-swadeshi-economics/421477/>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

¹¹ “PM Modi announces stimulus package of Rs 20 lakh crore for Covid-hit economy. Read full speech text here”, *Hindustan Times*, 12 May 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-announces-stimulus-package-of-rs-20-lakh-crore-for-covid-hit-economy-read-full-speech-text-here/story-O8xdL3IYLUGjKUSurdHvsJ.html>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

¹² Ibid.

Bharatiya thought has always been global and universal — believing in the concept of ‘*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*’, meaning the whole world is a family — economic decentralisation and social cohesion are the way forward to fulfill the objective of sustainable development.” He also anticipated Modi’s “vocal for local” slogan when he talked about a “harmonious and integrated world where ‘local’ will be equally important as the ‘global’”.¹³

Modi might be inverting the model of global capital moving into local markets to one where local markets meet domestic and global demand. This is perhaps more in keeping with the cultural and economic model of the RSS, where India is a country that gifts civilisation to the rest of the world. Modi alluded to this in his speech when he said that India is “the culture that believes in the welfare of the world” and India’s progress and the world’s progress remain deeply interconnected.¹⁴

Conclusion

Modi has reiterated many of these themes in subsequent interactions with industrialists. Addressing the Confederation of Indian Industry’s annual session on 3 June 2020, Modi emphasised the need to reduce import dependence in sectors such as mobile and defence manufacturing. In addition to the five pillars of a self-reliant India, Modi came up with five ‘Is – intent, inclusion, investment, infrastructure and innovation – to put the Indian economy on the growth track.¹⁵ In another interaction with the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Modi echoed some of the themes highlighted by the RSS, coming up with three Ps, “People, planet and profit – this is a very crucial theme. Many think these cannot co-exist but it is not so. They can and should work hand in hand.”¹⁶ While launching the virtual auction of 41 coal blocks on 18 June 2020, he said, “India will turn this COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity. It has taught India to be self-reliant and we will reduce our dependence on imports.”¹⁷

Many commentators have, however, pointed out that the Prime Minister’s self-reliance programme is big on slogans and low on content, comparing it to some of the government’s earlier initiatives, which were stillborn. Economic analyst T N Ninan’s attack had possibly

¹³ Arun Anand, “RSS calls for new ‘Swadeshi’ model of development, cautions against feelings of exclusion”, *The Print*, 6 May 2020. <https://theprint.in/india/rss-calls-for-new-swadeshi-model-of-development-cautions-against-feeling-of-exclusion/415520/>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

¹⁴ “PM Modi announces stimulus package of Rs 20 lakh crore for Covid-hit economy. Read full speech text here”, *Hindustan Times*, 12 May 2020.

¹⁵ ENS Economic Bureau, “India will get its growth back, need to be self reliant: PM”, *The Indian Express*, 3 June 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/pm-narendra-modi-self-reliant-cii-annual-session-2020-6439770/>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

¹⁶ BS Web Team, “Coronavirus turning point for self-reliant India, says PM Modi”, *Business Standard*, 11 June 2020. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/coronavirus-pandemic-turning-point-for-self-reliant-india-says-pm-modi-120061100428_1.html. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

¹⁷ PTI, “‘Unlocking India’s Coal Sector from Lockdown of Decades:’ PM Modi”, *Outlook*, 18 June 2020. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-will-reduce-dependence-on-imports-pm-modi-says-india-to-be-made-self-reliant-in-every-sector/354951>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.

been the most scathing, noting, “Anyone can string together a few alliterative words, but are they a substitute for serious thought?”¹⁸

The deteriorating relations with China, with whom India has a US\$49 billion (S\$68 billion) trade deficit, will further boost the self-reliance campaign. In the wake of the border clashes with China, there seems to be a growing public sentiment on boycotting Chinese goods. There are questions though on whether India can, in the short to medium term, reduce its dependence on Chinese imports, particularly in critical areas like pharmaceuticals. The real tension in the self-reliance policy might lie in the fact that whereas Modi is hoping to create opportunity out of a period of crisis, the RSS is seeking a fundamental change in economic policy.

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¹⁸ T N Ninan, “Modi’s 3 Ps, 5 Ts and several As (alliterations) can’t substitute serious thought or action”, *The Print*, 13 June 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modis-3-ps-5-ts-and-several-as-alliterations-cant-substitute-serious-thought-or-action/440631/>. Accessed on 22 June 2020.