

From Swadeshi to Atmanirbhar Bharat: The Evolution of India's Idea of Self-Reliance

Kriti Shrivastava

Research Scholar

Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

kritishri01@gmail.com

Abstract

Ever since Covid-19 induced supply chain disruptions and economic shutdown, several economies are rallying towards increasing protectionism. In India, there is a self-sufficiency angle added to that. This paper has tried to delineate the progression of economic nationalism in modern India – tracing its origins from the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements of 1905 C.E to the current Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative. Part I focuses on the epistemology of Swadeshi, emphasizing its economic, political, and spiritual aspects. It highlights the interaction between indigenous production, protectionism, and nationalist fervour during a pivotal period in India's national struggle against British imperialism. In Part II, there is an exploration of the links between Swadeshi and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative of the current NDA Government, dissecting convergences and divergences. It studies how both movements centre around the idea of self-reliance but acknowledges the temporal and structural disparities that differentiate them. It also questions the necessity of establishing any linkages at all, whether atmanirbharata can be considered a modern iteration of Swadeshi.

Keywords: economic nationalism, *Swadeshi*, *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, self-reliance.

Introduction

The *Swadeshi* and Boycott Movement, which followed the 1905 Bengal Partition, stimulated a boom in local manufacturing as a key politico-economic and social counter to British colonialism and industrial decline. Centred around economic independence, it formed a foundational element of poverty-stricken India's fight against colonization. By promoting domestic industries and snubbing imported products, *Swadeshi* fused economic nationalism with political disobedience.

Swadeshi: As a Philosophy and a Movement

Much work has been done which elucidates the nitty-gritties and the phenomenon of the 20th Century *Swadeshi* Movement. But as that is not the prime foray of this paper, I will mention a few relevant pointers which will help us in establishing its linkages – convergent or divergent – with 21st century *Atmanirbhar Bharat*.

Swadeshi in 1900s had multifarious layouts, but the most significant one is economic and its consequent political repercussions. Growth and expansion of early capitalism in India was conceived and encouraged. Some principal leaders including Gokhale pointed out that *Swadeshi* was a patriotic movement for ‘the expansion of production by the rational harnessing of capital, enterprise and skill.’ (Varma, 2006, p. 220). Tilak has also been noted to quote that economic malady wouldn’t stop until there was industrial growth and *Swadeshi* was the most straightforward way to achieve that. (Varma, 2006, p. 225)

Clubbed with Boycott, *Swadeshi* was a wholesome, all-encompassing nationalist struggle which claimed more than a simple economic agenda, given its increasing political influences and impacts. (Bakane, Ali, Murlidhara, & Buwa, 2015, p. 108) Tilak’s advocacy of boycott of foreign products was not without a simultaneous call for protectionism towards indigenous initiatives. He did recognize that, with political control of the country in foreign hands, much state protection wasn’t possible, but people could still work towards cultivating a spirit of protection on their own initiative. V. P Varma writes, “in 1907, at a speech in Allahabad, Tilak pleaded for a protective tariff of our own by the boycott of foreign goods...” (Varma, 2006, p. 221)

Swadeshi’s other faces – apart from political and economic – were spiritual and religious, with pioneers such as Aurobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra Pal. (Varma, 2006, p. 204) For the first time since 1857, masses were responding to the foreign threat with enthusiasm and vigour which was largely missing in the second half of the 19th century. Obviously, there were abounding reasons for that. Nationalism in India was not a result of just growth of capitalism. But brimming nationalism was a *raison d’etre* for and a consequence of *Swadeshi*. This relation of *Swadeshi* to Nationalism is to be noted here, as it will prove fruitful in understanding another argument later on in the paper.

Atmanirbhar Bharat

Atmanirbhar Bharat [ANB] literally translates to ‘self-reliant India’ and is used as an umbrella concept with respect to making India “a bigger and more

important part of the global economy”, by making administration efficient and resilient and the market more competitive. Concepts of both *Swadeshi* and ANB deal with ‘self-generating’ to a large extent. However, there is another aspect to *Atmanirbhar* which wasn’t even conceptually possible during the 1900s – of ‘self-sustaining’.

To elaborate, the primary aim of ANB is to make the country and its citizens independent and self-reliant in every way. Five pillars of ANB as officially outlined rest on – Economy, Infrastructure, Technology Driven System, Vibrant Demography and Demand. In May 2020, the government announced the ‘*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*’ in four tranches; (the influx of money amounting to almost 10% of the then GDP). The package emphasized on land, labour, liquidity, and laws, including measures across many sectors such as MSME, cottage industries, middle class, migrants, industry, etc. which would help fulfilling the vision of a self-reliant economy. (*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*, 2021)

Review of Literature

Upon reading the existing knowledge of literature, it is abundantly clear that ANB is often read as a contemporary re-articulation of the earlier *Swadeshi* movement rather than a completely new project. For example, Shikhare explicitly frames ANB as “a true *Swadeshi* movement,” arguing that Modi’s call to be “vocal for local” revives Gandhian *Swadeshi* economics while also warning that self-reliance must mean *glocalisation*—linking robust localisation with, not against, globalisation (Shikhare, 2020).

This is reflective of the fact that the most glaring difference between the status of native production in the Indian economy pre-and-post 1991 LPG reforms was protectionism in a closed economy vis-à-vis more nuanced and cohesive approach towards integrating the Indian economy with global supply chains – which only came to be heightened post pandemic. The slogan ‘vocal for local’ is accompanied by ‘local for global’ too.

Kumar (2021) also deepens this genealogy by tracing the idea of *atmanirbharta* from Gandhi’s ‘Hind Swaraj’— with its boycott of *videshi* goods and insistence on *Swadeshi* production and consumption — to PM’s post-COVID stimulus packages, arguing that the slogan “local is vocal” is almost a replica of Gandhian appeals but risks remaining rhetorical if structural inequalities and dependence on foreign capital persist (Kumar, 2021).

Ghosh (2021) similarly sets ANB against the background of Gandhian *Swadeshi*, but places it within a longer political-economy trajectory from Nehruvian heavy-industry planning, the Green Revolution and later liberalisation–globalisation; she asks whether genuine self-reliance is possible in a mutually dependent global economy, using *Swadeshi* as a historical benchmark of moral-economic self-discipline (Ghosh, 2021).

Dalal and Malik (2024) also anchor ANB in Gandhi’s ideas of Swaraj and *Swadeshi*, reading contemporary schemes—MSMEs, khadi promotion, Make in India, Skill India—as instruments to operationalise a long-standing quest for *Swadeshi*-based economic sovereignty and reduced import dependence (Dalal & Malik, 2024).

Within this broad consensus, Keshava’s chapter makes the linkage most explicit by calling *Atmanirbhar Bharat* a “refined version of the Gandhi *Swadeshi* concept,” defining *Swadeshi* through Gandhi’s own words and presenting *Atmanirbhar* as a blend of “vocal for local” with openness to FDI and WTO-based trade—effectively re-casting *Swadeshi* for a globalised era (Keshava, 2022).

Taken together, these works construct a layered narrative: *Swadeshi* and Gandhi’s vision of decentralised, village-centred, ethically grounded self-reliance provide the ideological and moral template; ANB re-deploys that template through fiscal packages, sectoral reforms and the “vocal for local” discourse while negotiating the realities of global value chains. The interlinkage lies in treating *Swadeshi* not merely as boycott or protectionism, but as a normative ideal of dignified, locally rooted production—an ideal that *Atmanirbhar Bharat* claims to inherit, reinterpret and implement under contemporary constraints of globalisation, technological change and post-pandemic recovery.

What is missing however, is a comprehensive comparative analysis of the whole spectrum of linkages between the two as a contributor to the existing knowledge base. Such a historical analysis is what this paper has tried to fulfil.

Method

Aim

This paper aims to examine the progression of self-reliance in India’s nationalist narrative, mapping its path from the *Swadeshi* of the 1900s to the current *Atmanirbhar Bharat* program.

Objectives

Some primary objectives of this research include:

- To trace the historical evolution of self-reliance over the past century, identifying ideological and practical convergences and divergences;
- To analyse the economic foundations of both *Swadeshi* & Boycott and *Atmanirbhar* initiative, focusing on indigenous production and consumption, along with protectionism as drivers of economic nationalism;
- To explore how decolonization narratives in contemporary India draw on *Swadeshi*'s legacy to reframe Indian identity in a globalized context;
- To evaluate the validity and utility of comparing these movements, considering their distinct socio-political and economic contexts;

Research Questions

This study examines past and present forms of self-reliance, addressing these core research questions:

- How do the epistemic and operative aspects of self-reliance in *Swadeshi* align or vary from those of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, and to what extent is the latter an updated version of the former?
- What influence, if any, has economic nationalism exercised itself on local manufacturing and protective policies in both eras? How have these adapted over time?
- Considering the chronological and institutional gaps between the movements, is linking them essential or beneficial, and what do these parallels reveal about India's nationalist path?

By answering the above mentioned, the research aims to enrich academic discussions on economic nationalism and decolonization, providing detailed perspectives on India's pursuit of autonomy.

Design of the Study

This research adopts a qualitative method of study. Obtaining data from various official and non-official sources, this study was designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the various elements of two policies which are often confused to be very similar, but are quite different in their conceptualisation and implementation. Examples like *Swadeshi* textile sectors and *Atmanirbhar Bharat*'s MSME programs demonstrate real-world applications of seemingly abstract policies.

Data Collection

Sources blended both primary and secondary works including Prime Ministers' speeches, official policy documents of the Government of India, Policy documents of the State Governments etc. Data was systematically collected using a historical review.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using comparative analysis and discourse evaluation. Important dimensions of *Swadeshi* and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* which were analysed included economic (local output, safeguards), political (state involvement, civic engagement), and social (identity-building) realms.

Results

Table 1. Results of Comparative Analysis

Aspect	Tilak's <i>Swadeshi</i> Movement	Modi's <i>Atmanirbhar Bharat</i> Abhiyan	Similarities / Overlaps
Nature	Political and socio-economic movement against colonial rule, rooted in nationalism.	Economic and developmental policy initiative for self-reliant India in the globalized era.	Both emphasize self-reliance and reducing dependence on external forces.
Historical Context	Launched in 1905 during the Bengal Partition by the British, as a resistance strategy against colonial exploitation.	Launched in 2020 amid COVID-19 pandemic and global supply-chain disruptions, highlighting vulnerabilities of external dependency.	Both emerged as responses to crises (colonial oppression vs. pandemic & global disruptions).
Purpose	To boycott British goods, promote indigenous industry, revive Indian craftsmanship, and fuel nationalist sentiment.	To strengthen domestic industries, boost manufacturing, encourage innovation, reduce imports, and enhance global competitiveness.	Both aim at economic empowerment of the nation .

(Contd...)

Aims	Political freedom through economic self-sufficiency; revival of <i>Swadeshi</i> industries; cultural revival.	Economic resilience, technological advancement, job creation, stronger supply chains, positioning India as a global hub.	Both stress indigenous production and empowerment of local enterprises .
Economic Dimension	Focused on cottage industries, khadi, handicrafts, and local products as symbols of resistance.	Focuses on MSMEs, digital economy, defence manufacturing, renewable energy, and global integration of Indian economy.	Both promote domestic production , but scale and sectors differ.
Political Dimension	Instrument of anti-colonial struggle and mass mobilization against British imperialism.	A development vision within sovereign India, not anti-foreign but aiming at balanced globalization.	Both tied to national identity and political legitimacy .
Cultural Dimension	Strong cultural revivalist undertone: invoking pride in Indian civilization, traditions, and self-sufficiency.	Uses slogans like " <i>Vocal for Local</i> " to build cultural pride around Indian goods and traditions.	Both appeal to cultural pride and nationalism .
Global Outlook	Inward-looking, emphasizing resistance to foreign rule and goods.	Outward-looking, aiming to make India a global manufacturing hub while reducing overdependence.	Both recognize the need for domestic strength as the basis of global presence .
Impact	Laid the foundation for Indian independence movement; created nationalist consciousness and economic resistance.	Shaping economic reforms, industrial policies, and India's global positioning; long-term impact still unfolding.	Both served as turning points in India's politico-economic trajectory .

Discussion: Linkages

Convergences

There are obvious linkages between the two: both focus on indigenous production and creating an efficient self-generating economy. Albeit there were political and social ramifications which surrounded *Swadeshi* and have begun to surround ANB, they both are at its core, serving economic needs of a people. Boycott of 1905 can be interpreted as protectionism today which plagues globalisation. It is a characteristic of not just India, but many leading economies of 21st century. As mentioned earlier, protective tariffs in 1900s weren't structurally plausible given the alien government; presently, however, many indigenous budding industries and sectors which cannot withstand the hurricane of free and open market are lent support. ANB albeit doesn't propound protectionism word to word, there is an inherent undercurrent of such a mindset.

Protectionism can only flourish a people when it is compiled with a strong alternative supply to meet the demand. On delineating the overall trajectory of Indian economy, we can say that protectionism as a sentiment and economic

tool, has struck us Indians for the first time since our economy opened post 1991 – the only other relevant modern example coming from Boycott of 1905. That is a long way. Consider the following proposition for pondering over this.

The foundations of manufacturing were definitely laid in 1905 when several businesses sprung up for the cause of nationalism and curbing deindustrialization. Over the decades, post – independence, capitalism balanced socialism delicately with Mahalanobis Model, Indira Gandhi's nationalization of enterprises, LPG Reforms of 1991 and finally the Make in India era of Prime Minister Modi. The trajectory described above reflects the classic transition from a closed to an open economy. Having been swept into globalisation after liberalisation at the turn of the 21st century, we have only recently – following the pandemic – consolidated a protectionist approach.

Divergences

Once we start to clarify the similarities between the two concepts and jot them down in point format, it becomes complementarily clear what the differences between the two are as well. The major divergence stems from the fact that they took place over almost a century of each other and these very years saw the polity and economy of the subcontinent and the State of India change vastly. *Swadeshi* and Boycott [S&B] took place as a popular uprising against an oppressive government. All facets lead us to the conclusion of a down-to-up approach in whatever capitalism or nationalism followed. ANB has an important feature of government support embedded into it. It is not even close to any uprising against the authorities.

Another divergence which logically follows the coattails of the above-mentioned difference is the leadership of these two movements. While S&B was plentifully riddled with several contributors right from Surendranath Banerjee, Anandamohan Bose, Aurobindo Ghose, Bipin Chandra Pal and Rabindranath Tagore in the east to stalwarts like Tilak and Gokhale in the west, ANB – by the virtue of existing in a politically free India – has technically, just one leader: the elected leader of the people. It is he who runs the policy and creates pointers for the areas of expansion of self-reliance. Should ANB expand into varying spheres – education, space, defence etc., it would be because of him and should it put its feet down and rest, it would be because of him. This scenario could be interpreted as grim – that a whole movement relies on one individual alone – were it not for the fact that he is an elected

leader of the masses. Every five years, it is the people of the nation who take decisions – in whatever little way – of the policy that is going to be pursued by the government of the country in the prospective future. In that sense, ANB is much more decentralised than S&B ever was because it now has a centralised leadership, unlike in 1900s when there were pockets of resistance against the British and a spurt of economic nationalism which might/not have witnessed sustainability.

Moreover, the scope of ANB is much more encompassing than *Swadeshi* ever was – obviously the technological changes of a century have to be accounted for. ANB deals with varying expanding industrial and other sectors of a sovereign state while S&B dealt with showcasing frustration of an oppressed psyche towards a government which was exploitative at its very core. In many ways, therefore, S&B can only be said to be a rather primitive precursor of ANB, but never can they be treated on the same footing for compelling reasons of temporal and structural transformations.

Necessity for the Linkages

Given the temporal and temperamental differences of the polity and economy of the subcontinent, it is only right to put in *Atmanirbhar* as *Swadeshi* 2.0 – better and improved – in its nature and scope. But does this exercise lead to any constructive thought formation or is it futile to correlate two phenomena, a century apart and try to read one into and onto each other – even though they have a proclivity for similar results?

One doesn't need careful consideration to realise S&B predates ANB, not just chronologically, but also in other parameters such as scope, general aims and expected outcomes. There is an implicit understanding already present; which makes this paper unambitiously a work towards creating explicit theories and arguments. That is, however, not a complete assessment. There is a recurrent nudge of researchers towards writing contemporary history. History of the present times. There is nothing wrong in documenting one's times, but by looking between the lines, the *raison d'être* for such a theme becomes clearer – Nationalism. It would be wise to point out here that *Swadeshi* was inherently linked with Nationalism, so much so that they birthed each other. Is it such a shocker then, that ANB turns out to be one too? The next section shall deal with the idea of creating an *Atmanirbhar* identity in the 21st century.

The Atmanirbhar Psyche

What is more important to note than the impact of S&B on ANB is the recent trend in the political consciousness of the country which is striving to become *Atmanirbhar* in its Indian identity. The Prime Minister has mentioned so on many occasions including his 75th Independence Day speech, that India was freed of the colonial yoke in 1947; our minds however, continued to remain subservient to the west. This narrative itself is twofold. The first contains subtle hints of how the world (especially the developed nations) viewed us – as a polity, society and market economy; while the second reflects the self-conceived notions and images about ourselves, i.e., how the Indian middle class viewed themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Undoubtedly, there were better living conditions and more opportunities that the world had to offer us once. But as India is catching up with the west in terms of quality of life elucidated by several indices, be it in education, pharmaceuticals, GDP and related figures, industrialization and manufacturing, processing and other technology laden advancements and overall improvement in the quality of life, it was only a matter of time when one government or another called out the citizens to embrace their identity as a proud Indian through and through. Gone are the days when it was the routine of the day in middle class households to sit down and list the number of things wrong with the country. Even if they aren't gone, the political narrative currently, is to get rid of such a mindset for good.

Here, we locate the several speeches, given by prime minister at home and the external affairs minister abroad – of how it is the duty of the citizens to be proud of their heritage, remember pre-1757 histories, unearth forgotten heroes from pages lost in translation, decolonise the Indian mind and reinvent the Indian identity. At this stage, I don't need to discuss minutely several policy shifts, renaming roads and cities or list any of the right-leaning newspaper editorials or recent literary productions which enrich our thought processes these days. Anyone who is yet unaware of this not-so-subtle-shift, must be off the internet.

Such a change is neither good nor bad. It is what it is. From a bird's eye view, it can be deemed as positive; given definitions of a nation state, such a narrative does tend to overarch regional and linguistic divisions and hail us all together as one people, surprisingly without harming any individual group/regions' sentiments. As it remembers every local hero [particularly constructive as an

example to my argument is this speech of hon'ble PM on the inauguration of Lachit Borphukan – a forgotten Ahom hero – as reported by DD India (Modi, 2022)] forgotten in the struggle against the British, it unites them in a similar manner as it once did 100 years ago. It would be precise to note, that 75 years on, this recent project of decolonising the Indian psyche, still invokes the same perpetrator as was over a century ago – with the central government taking over the role of haughty pre-independence Congress – colouring the landscape into hues of saffron. Only except, the perpetrator is in our minds.

And it might as well be. Reclaiming a culture and a heritage is never a negative act. It shall become one when we reclaim selectively. For example, the functionality of the Mughal era is a highly contested one among extremes today. But that is a question which we needn't concern ourselves with much for what it was, is our history. And the present day shall become history tomorrow. So, renaming Allahabad with its erstwhile name Prayagraj, shall also be remembered.

Decolonising the Indian psyche is what the subtheme of this seminar is, in actuality. The political consciousness of the country today, strives to become *atmanirbhar*, self-sufficient and self-reliant in its Indian identity – creating a nationalist modern-state oriented identity – looking back in history for answers and correlations which weren't explored before. That *Atmanirbhar* isn't quite new, that it had established linkages with *Swadeshi* which the subcontinent experienced almost a century ago (and that it was Tilak's *Swadeshi*) reverberate the idea of not making the implicit theories explicit, but the need of the polity – for the lay – to establish a self-sufficient identity.

Conclusion

After studying the linkages, it is clear that there are several converging and diverging relationships between the two personifications of economic self-sufficiency. While *Swadeshi* emerged as a grassroots strategy of resistance against colonial exploitation, *Atmanirbhar Bharat* represents a state-led developmental vision aimed at economic resilience in an interconnected global order. Despite their differing contexts, both movements share core commitments to nationalism, indigenous empowerment, and economic independence. The contemporary rhetoric of decolonizing the Indian psyche resonates with *Swadeshi*'s nationalist fervour, reflecting continuity in India's pursuit of sovereignty, even as strategies adapt to new realities.

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