

[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > [Views](#) > What it will take for India to be truly 'atmanirbhar'



India has an opportunity to carry out reforms to become truly 'atmanirbhar' (Ramesh Pathania/Mint)

## What it will take for India to be truly 'atmanirbhar'

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**Ishteyaque Amjad**

Though covid couldn't have come at a worse time, it presents an opportunity for India to undertake wide-ranging reforms to become self-reliant. But this doesn't mean shutting out global trade. Rather, expand ties to strengthen our economy and be able to take care of ourselves and others.

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A lot has been said about 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' Close journey of economic self-reliance. We understand that it is a launch-pad for fostering entrepreneurship, nurturing innovation and creating an ecosystem for symbiotic rural-urban development, as India recovers from covid. What we really need to understand, however, is what it takes for a nation to attain atmanirbharta. It is not very different from the evolution of an individual—from an infant to an able person who can take care of oneself and others. The same is true for nation-building. A nation is more than its geography. When people despite their diversities come together to accomplish a higher collective goal, they make a country more equitable. That we are at a crossroads as a nation is more than just a clichéd expression. We have come a long way and have an equally long way to go. As a young nation, we still need to build the institutions that can stand the test of time.

The US and China are the two leading economies of the world, but they are completely different countries. The US is the oldest democracy, an epitome of a free-market economy, but more importantly, it is a strong soft power. Many could argue that it is this soft power that has made it the nucleus of this planet. China, on the other hand, has scale, discipline and a focused approach, but is not a democracy. India has both. We have one of the oldest civilizations; we are the world's largest democracy, and a country more diverse than any. We are the world's boldest experiment with democracy, having adopted sophisticated political disciplines, such as universal suffrage, from day one. We also have huge demographic dividends that we have not been able to unleash. If we don't act now, this boon could rapidly turn into a bane, as we are already seeing an aggressive brigade of youth vigilante.

Covid could not have hit India at a worse time than this. India is already battling the challenges of economic slowdown and unemployment. Yet, if we pause and look at the present situation dispassionately, we will realize that there cannot be a better time for us to commence the

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The moment is now for us to be vocal, but we need to expand the definition of local rather than shrink it. We should rework our economic models, initiate forward-looking labour policies, create an equilibrium between land, labour and capital, and make economic development more inclusive.

Currently, too many of us depend on agriculture and allied activities. An extraordinary network of roads built in the past couple of decades can be leveraged to rebuild the part of India that can be referred to as the 'middle India'. Our disproportionate urbanization has resulted in just a few megacities getting the lion's share of migrant workers. India has 50 cities with population of more than a million. It is time to create commercial opportunities and employment in all these cities. India benefitted immensely by providing information technology services to the West. There's no reason why these cities cannot do that for both Indian and global businesses. Most of our industrial townships were created in the 1960s and 70s. Besides building industrial ecosystems, these towns produced some of the finest human resources thanks to their high quality educational institutes. Now we need to repurpose them. The 60s until the 80s witnessed some of our brightest minds migrate to the West, and many first-generation professionals have excelled in their respective fields. Similarly, post the 1991 economic liberalization, a similar exodus from small towns to mega cities took place as new suburbs were created. This lifted millions out of poverty and uplifted a whole generation of middle class. Many of us are living examples of

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LATEST

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Plain Facts

Primer

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Improving the per capita gross domestic product of Indians will unbridle the advantage of a huge consumer base and improve the quality of consumption, which currently lags global standards. India is one of the biggest consumption economies and needs proactive demand-generation, especially after covid. For instance, the per capita advertisement in India is extremely low. Of the global \$1.3 trillion advertisement market, India accounts for just about \$10 billion. So, while we have the technology that equips us to build world class apps, we must also ensure they flourish by attracting advertisement revenue.

As we go through this policy window, we must take some collective bold decisions and put forward the strength of our 29 states. They must compete fiercely, but also cooperate to catapult India's growth. This is doable, as has been observed in the functioning of the Goods and Services Tax Council. We also need a roadmap for our states to act according to their natural endowment. In the next decade, we need state capitals and other cities to house the headquarters of major companies, both public and private. That is what made the US economy so much bigger than the rest of the world. We need more multinational corporations to set up manufacturing in India; they bring high standards, best practices and healthy competition. Regulatory cholesterol also needs to be reduced.

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Plain Facts

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to support each other and build an inclusive nation. A lot of noise needs to be curtailed and we must learn to let our institutions do their job. As a former soldier, I am aghast at the way all our geopolitical, military and strategic battles are being fought on television channels and social media. This doesn't serve the nation well.

Lastly, it is a pity that South Asia has the lowest intra-region trade anywhere in the world. It is the most populated region and is growing at a healthy pace. There is an extraordinary opportunity waiting to be seized. While the neighbouring countries will benefit, it will also provide India the economic and geopolitical standing that it deserves. Today's economy, supply chain, manufacturing and the fates of nations are all intertwined, and there's no way for a self-reliant nation to grow without being open to doing business with the rest of the world. As we talk of India taking advantage of manufacturing moving out of China, we must also realize that we cannot beat the competition by hoping they get weaker. The only way to beat them is by becoming better than them.

*The author is president, Public Affairs Forum of India*

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