

THE QUEST FOR SELF-RELIANCE

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Devolution of Powers & Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges therein - Panchayats & Municipalities

Apr 27, 2020-Monday

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Last week, addressing the heads of gram panchayats across the country, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi spoke of how a big lesson from the pandemic was the need for self-reliance — how each village, district, state, and the country as a whole, needed to become self-sufficient. He underlined that it was no longer possible to depend on the outside world. His assertion is understandable. As global supply chains break down, borders become tighter, flow of goods and labour becomes more difficult, countries turn insular, and protectionist policies become acceptable, the world will not be what it was. India will, thus, have to boost domestic capabilities.

But, at the same time, the PM's claim represents a significant shift in what has been India's trajectory for at least three decades. From the days of seeking self-reliance as a post-colonial country in the 1950s and 1960s, India — partially in the 1980s, but more substantially in 1991 and subsequent decades — embraced the idea of connectivity and globalisation. The idea that a country, let alone a state, cannot produce everything; that leveraging each other's comparative advantages was economically sound through a liberal trading regime; and that being interconnected was an asset gained ground. This has helped India grow. The pandemic may represent a partial reversal in this worldview.

More crucially, is the ambition of villages, or districts, or states being self-reliant possible? Migration has taken place, consumer goods have penetrated into each corner, agricultural markets are tied together, supply chains are interlinked, and technology and connectivity drive the economy and society in intricate ways. Boosting domestic capabilities is necessary in the new context, but self-reliance may not be the most realistic goal.

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