

Atmanirbhar Bharat

The Role of the Academia for a Developed India

*Abhishek Pratap Singh**

INTRODUCTION

The desire for self-reliance or the goal of 'Atmanirbharta' is not something novel to the policy discourse on development and growth. Nation states across the globe have time and again made a resolved effort to build a self-reliant nation led by visionary leadership, growing economic strengths and sustained governance reforms. Desire for global trade and commerce sounds nice when the world order is fine. However, when states face vulnerable external situations, they tend to devise a methodology offering technical and economic solutions to reduce external dependency and enhance self-reliance.

Most aspiring nations tend to aim for self-reliance or 'atmanirbharta'. Take the example of Israel, which has undertaken its own journey towards self-reliance and faced perpetual threats and violence in history. Despite that, Israel has been a winner growing from total external dependency to maximum self-reliance. Over the years, it has provided many technical solutions and advancements in defence modernisation.¹ The same can be said about Singapore in the 1960s. The turbulent city with weak and stressed resources,

* Dr Abhishek Pratap Singh is Assistant Professor at Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi and Member, Hindi Advisory Committee at NITI Aayog, Government of India.

made an impressive case for economic development and transformation backed by the economic consistency and desire for self-reliance. The excellent human resource management and policy choices played a key role to this success mantra in Singapore. Education plays a very critical role in the process of nation-building and development of the country. In recent years, the Government of India has initiated several policies and programmes bringing major educational reforms to build a self-reliant India. In this process, the educational sector is fundamental and can play a transformative role in the nation's development.

The intellectual roots of Western discourse have been largely shaped by the ideas of individualistic and materialistic approach to existence. The emphasis on unfettered consumerism driven by the forces of market economy has led to belief in the self-centred idea of happiness, which is bereft of social care, empathy, harmony and peace. It is this approach, which despite great strides in the fields of science and technology has led to no end for human misery, poverty, social rifts and crises, competition and agony in our society. In Bhartiya school of thought, it is widely believed that happiness and growth is not simply related to objects of gratification, but it is the inner essence that connects our mind, body and soul. The quest for happiness can be sustainable, inclusive and successful only if it is shaped by the ideas of empathy and collectivism.

In the same spirit and logic, the goal of self-reliance is not limited to material well-being but is shaped by India's spiritual and philosophical outlook different from the West. It is not anti-West in any sense rather a non-Western outlook from a civilisational perspective.² The idea of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' values the role of happiness and growth as an embodiment of collective force for the society. India as a civilisational state represents these values driven by its rich history and culture.

In 2020, the whole world had to face the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in unprecedented loss of human life, global crisis of health facilities, social stress and challenges on economic front. The pandemic led to irreversible blow on the global economy in industrial sectors like production and supply chains, manufacturing, civil aviation, travel and tourism, entertainment and real estate. This caused huge loss of jobs and employment for the people with failing levels of small businesses and poor levels of foreign trade in India. In order to address this economic challenge and crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the clarion call for 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', or 'Self-Reliant India'.³ The goal of 'atmanirbharta' is a long-cherished dream of our nation-building process in the post-

independence era, and also resonates with the vision of our current leadership to make India a global player in a volatile geo-political and geo-economic world order.

WHAT IS ATMANIRBHARTA?

The concept of 'atmanirbharta' is not new to the public discourse in India. However, in recent years it has dominated our thought process and policy choices. It aims to realise the dream of 'Viksit Bharat' or Developed India by 2047. The immediate origin of the concept can be well attributed to the challenges brought by the pandemic and our efforts to find prudent economic solutions to it. It also shapes our developmental, economic and public policy discourse towards Viksit Bharat. As a nation, when we celebrate 75 years of independence, we need deeper commitment and collective resolve from the government, industry and civil society to achieve this goal.

At the very basic level, translated into English, it means being self-reliance. However, the meaning does not offer a clear understanding about the concept, simply because the notion of 'self' differs from one nation to another. This difference is in reference to the development model, history, culture and the very character and goal of every nation from present to future. For one, the goal of self-reliance might be a hegemonic expression of power and sufficiency and for the other, it is more of a desire and tendency for universal brotherhood backed by a sustainable economic model.

The concept of self-reliance can be understood as the ability of a nation's economy to produce and consume essential goods and services without any kind of external dependence. However, the processes of globalisation led to some critical questions for the goal of self-reliant economy as it necessitates dependence among nations in the contemporary world. This was driven by global integration of market economy and new norms to foster comparative advantage. But the logic of globalisation could not last long as global financial crisis of 2008 exposed the limits of market integration and the process of globalisation itself.

The concept of self-reliance is not moving to the classical economic paradigm of manufacturing and delivering services within national boundaries. Nor does it aim for a return to import substitution or propagating any kind of economic isolation. This is no longer economically feasible and prudent as a policy choice. The goal of self-reliant India is to make critical improvements in the domestic economic model backed by new policy changes and reforms

in fiscal and monetary frameworks, building world-class public infrastructure, enhancing human capital and resource management, employing new and advanced technology tools, and developing a resilient global supply chain. It also envisages enhancing our technological capabilities and encouraging investment from foreign countries in key sectors. This initiative fosters a perspective to utilise international trade strategically for securing the national objectives.

To quote former President Ram Nath Kovind, 'India is on a "transformational path" and its quest for "self-reliance" does not mean "isolation" but creating capabilities that can help the entire humanity.'⁴ He said this addressing the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean country to take advantage of the government's policies and participate in the country's growth story. The vision of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' was also outlined by the Prime Minister in his inaugural address at the India Global Week 2020. He highlighted that this idea 'merges domestic production and consumption with global supply chains' without being 'self-contained or closed to the world'. He also said that 'the country needed to focus on efficiency, equality, and resilience to enable self-sustaining and self-generating growth'.⁵ The idea is more about leveraging domestic strengths, and cultivating resilience with a mission to develop India's strengths and competition in key areas.

By leveraging technology and innovation, it aims to bring a behavioural change in our policies and plans, towards a more sustained model of building capabilities in key sectors for the country. It also seeks to advance liberalisation with safety nets and encourage market efficiency with necessary safeguards to avoid any social and political disruptions.

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA AS AN ENABLER

There is no doubt that to build a strong and self-reliant India, we must invest heavily in our people. India is a country with a huge population and with an edge of demographic dividend, but to make this strength transform into being a large knowledge-driven economy it is important to invest in our human resource. Education is one key instrument, which is not just the biggest 'social leveller' but also a potent force to realise this transformation. In this context, it is necessary to underscore the importance of the academia in the transformation of India as envisioned in an 'atmanirbhar Bharat'. Academia can play a bigger role in bridging gaps as we accelerate in pursuit of our goals for a self-reliant India. New advancements and findings in the global education landscape must be shared to enhance both research and teaching

practices. The robustness of the higher education framework is rooted in its inherent dynamism, which promotes inclusive development and plays a crucial role in the Viksit-Bharat-by-2047 initiative.

The academic ecosystem, more specifically the higher education sector, is becoming increasingly pivotal for India as we strive for self-reliance and aim to become a developed nation by 2047. The vision of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' is a complete plan that includes multiple aspects of growth with inclusivity and development with empowerment. In this process, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India can play a major role by acting as incubators of knowledge, newer ideas and innovation, and by producing well-skilled human resource. S. Nair mentioned that higher education is one of the most important factors to strengthen the country's economy. He mentioned that higher education helps in the development of the young population and contributes to national growth.⁶ In addition, educational institutions have always been a key player in social change and economic transformation. Therefore, to achieve the goal of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and relying on key role of academia for this, India adopted several reformative changes under the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020).

Elements such as knowledge, wisdom, creativity and motivation are fundamental to an effective education system. A proficient education system should exhibit an inherent resilience that enables it to implement and adopt new strategies to address unexpected challenges for the country. Cultivating contemporary skills and imparting new ethical standards and cognitive approaches in a nuanced manner are vital components that can establish a strong groundwork for the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'.

The NEP 2020 resembles all these long-term changes in our academic ecosystem, with a futuristic outlook and strong academic foundations. It seeks to build academia that can improve the quality of education, drive innovation and research, build community engagement, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, adopt technology integration and produce inclusive model and practices.⁷ At the same time, it also encourages to leverage from real-world experiences, new learning tools, experiential learning and quantitative thinking. The policy sets out major reforms in the education system to achieve the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' mission. It aims to make India a global knowledge superpower.

The role and relevance of the academia is not limited only to teaching and skill training but also includes relevant areas like promoting new research, advancing technology adoption, nurturing innovation, cultivation leadership amongst the youth in order to turn them into better human resource and

asset for the country. The most important task relates to the role of education and how it balances with our future work demands in the industry. In case of India, the major concern has not been the rate of workforce entering the economy, rather the low levels of their employability due to poor education and skill training. Moreover, in a technologically driven world the future lies in new areas like artificial intelligence, automation and the gig workforce economy. It is necessary that our educational system integrate new work experiences deeply into their course structure and curriculum, allowing students to become easily employable in the industry.

In addition, we need to offer more opportunities for internships and apprenticeships so that students gain the kind of experiences and exposure to mould them into working professionals. Academia–Industry partnerships are a key policy guideline under the NEP 2020, so that our education system opens up avenues for innovation and entrepreneurship so as to secure a career in the future, and also shape our younger generation as potential employers. The industry–academia interaction can bring new knowledge and ideas back to our classrooms. The MSME sector constitutes 80 per cent of our workforce. By engaging them with the academia we can invest in new research and drive innovation at local levels to cater to our growing economy. To address all these issues, the NEP 2020 calls for an increase in funding for higher education, expanding their capacities, quality improvement, developing a decentralised model of governance and promoting a learner-centric culture in our academic institutions.

The National Statistical Organisation (NSO) report 2020 on ‘Household Social Consumption: Education in India’, identified some major concerns related to the rural–urban divide, digital divide, heavy household expenditure, literacy rates differentials in our educational model.⁸ This also leads to high rate of dropouts and poor enrollment ratio in our educational system. To address these issues, many new programmes have been undertaken by the government in the education sector.

One major reform relates to a comprehensive scheme of PM eVidya, which has been initiated under the ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan’ in May 2020 unifying all efforts related to digital/online/on-air education and enable multi-mode access to education.⁹ It aims to build national digital infrastructure for providing quality e-content for school education. Various other digital initiatives have also been undertaken by the Ministry of Education namely SWAYAM (‘Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds’), SWAYAM Prabha, National Digital Library (NDL), Virtual Lab, e-Yantra, NEAT (National Education Alliance for Technology), FOSSEE (Free Open-

Source Software for Education) to ensure quality and easy access to education for our students.

The goal of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' is well aligned with our desire to be the 'Viswaguru', positioning India as a reform state and source of learning for the world. The role of the academia is going to be crucial in this transformational journey in the near future. The global problems of ethnic diversity, religious fundamentalism and social inequality are desperately seeking new answers, which the Western discourse has failed to answer completely. A values-based education system, which fosters diversity and openness can be a way forward to address these problems.

The history of Indian civilisation and heritage had major examples of values-based and multi-disciplinary education systems in Nalanda, Takshashila, Vallabhi and Vikramshila, which attracted the attention of global scholarship in the past. Our aspiration to build an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' necessitates reimagining of our education system and offering global solutions to our problems. We also need to make India as the global destination for higher education. Indian education system is shaped by vibrant democracy, social diversity and an intellectually engaging society coming together at the affordable cost.

Another issue related to the role of academia is the policy reform to decentralise the urban-centred higher education system in India. 'Atmanirbhar India' needs to expand the contours of its higher education much beyond major urban cities and develop strong network of regional and local level institutional capacities to serve the masses. This requires investment in local capacity-building and expanding of public infrastructure at rural levels. The goal of a self-reliant India demands creating a knowledge society at rural and urban levels both, driving our path to economic transformation and social change.

In this process of making a paradigm shift in our approach towards education, technology, science and innovation to realise our dream of 'Viksit Bharat', we also need to reflect on some grey areas and related concerns. For example, take the case of India's successful Information Technology (IT) sector revolution and its global success. India's IT rise began somewhere in the late 1990s with multiple software export services coming to the fold like Infosys, Satyam, TCS and more alike. One of the most important reasons for this rise was India's young and English-speaking demography. Software makers started opening their IT development centres to cut costs. Also, big players who were the consumers of IT, started working with Indian companies. This led to a rapid rise in India's IT service exports. Even today,

India is one of the leading exporters of IT services in the world. India has come a long way from a humble beginning. But there is more to it. One thing that many of us do not realise is the difference between IT-services led growth and IT-product led growth. India, no doubt is the factory of global IT services in the world, but still there is a long way to go to become global software exporter country. The call for self-reliance and subsequent policy choices need to mediate this complexity in our IT sector industry.

Moreover, the focus should be on internationalisation of our education system and academia, and creating an ecosystem where global collaborations and partnerships are promoted in learning and research areas. The vision of an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' must focus on an innovative research culture in STEM and social sciences that can impact economic growth and the social change. This will take significant public policy reforms and resource investment to enable this change in our education system. We need to take inspiration from Madan Mohan Malaviya's vision for education. He conceived a unique model of education based on the values of integration, harmony and peace, deriving from our rich cultural heritage and combining it with science, reason and an inquisitive mind, much like the way he shaped and formed the Banaras Hindu University (BHU).¹⁰

CONCLUSION

As we strive to make India self-reliant and developed, the role of academia and its educational institutions becomes critical in helping to create a workforce that is learned and skilled, innovative and adaptable and aware of the realities and challenges of the future.

First, in the case of the IT industry, India needs to establish itself as not just IT services provider but as a leading software product exporter country globally. In addition to IT software and services, other types of IT exports include engineering research and development (ER&D) services and software products. Creating software products involves investing more on fundamental and long-term research, encouraging risk-taking abilities, promoting new innovation and critical thinking in the academia. Things are improving but the growth is concentrated in a few key places like Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), which are the torchbearers of innovative product making in India. We need to expand this and make it a part of our greater academic culture from software to sciences to humanities. 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' must be able to offer global solutions to diverse problems.

Second, we also need to address the challenge of not being able to transform academic research into more successful outcomes or products. At times, the academia tends to be engaged more with basic research and have the advantage of long-time span. On the other hand, industry research does have more financial resources but are expected to produce in an early time-frame, so they are more applied in their outcomes and product delivery. This is also one of the reasons that despite growing number of industry academia research collaborations, sometimes, we lack in bringing the significant contribution. We need to have a comprehensive Research Incentive Policy (RIP) encouraging quality research and consultancy, focusing on outputs and delivery in our academic system.

Third, India is witnessing a start-up culture boom, which is rapidly growing. New start-up companies can collaborate with the academia, thereby engaging with trained personnel and experts, optimising it to their benefit and delivery. Our policies need to encourage and foster such collaborations between the academia and industry. Moreover, specific technology and incubation centres established in academic institutions through government funding and project-based assistance can play a key role and fine-tune them to deliver translational research. This way research works in academia can be directed to be more competitive and driven by industrial standards and demands.

Student cultural exchanges have the potential to foster harmony and creativity, bridging social divides. Student Experience in Inter-State Living (SEIL) is one such initiative by Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), working to promote the feeling of oneness amongst every student of Bharat, preferably connecting North East region with the other parts in the country. It is essential to emphasise both empirical and normative perspectives to effectively tackle societal issues. The government's visionary outlook for the future of education is encouraging, placing India in a leading position on the global stage. Cognitive abilities ought to equip students to address and offer solutions to socio-economic and political challenges at the national and global level, also promoting institutional collaboration and cooperation with other stakeholders. The realisation of 'Viksit Bharat by 2047' can be accomplished by fostering creativity and a sense of responsibility in students, while providing them with ethical knowledge, improving their decision-making abilities and equipping them with skills that are relevant for the changing times. Academia is the key force, which can bring about the change in our mindset and cultivate the necessary skills required for the nation to achieve 'atmanirbharta'.

NOTES

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