

## “Atman Nirbhar Bharat” - Economic Crises and Self-Reliance in the COVID-19 Pandemic

By: Shareen Joshi, Siddharth Muchhal, Connor Brennan, Ria Pradhan, Joyce Yang

Prime Minister Modi was first elected in 2014 for his promise of *Vikaas* (development). India’s economic record in the past six years however, has been unsteady. Since 2018, GDP growth has fallen steadily, reaching just 5% per year in 2019-20. Modi, a proponent of globalization, technology, investment and trade, remained committed to pro-market economic policies.

The Covid-19 crisis however, changed everything. In February 2020, Prime Minister Modi embraced President Trump in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, anticipating a major trade deal with the United States. But on March 25, India declared one of the most stringent urban lockdowns of any country in the world, halting economic activity and stranding millions of rural migrant workers. India has also struggled with the second-highest caseload in the world. Recent estimates suggest that GDP contracted by 7.7% in 2020-2021, wiping out approximately four years of economic progress.<sup>1</sup> The closure of borders and the upheaval of the world economy necessitated a significant change of course.

After a period of unprecedented silence, Prime Minister Modi emerged with a different but storied mantra: self-reliance. In shocking contrast to his past rhetoric, in a speech in April 2020, Modi announced that “the state of the world today teaches us that Atman Nirbhar Bharat (a self-reliant India) is the only path. It is said in our scriptures, *Eshah Panthah*, that is, self-sufficient India.” Thus Modi introduced “Atman Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan,” a Rs. 20 lakh crore (20 trillion) COVID-19 relief package, equivalent to 10% of India’s GDP, and a significantly different economic platform of self-reliance that sharply diverged from earlier market-oriented policies.

Since April, the Modi government and his BJP political party have full-heartedly embraced Atman Nirbhar Bharat, mentioned in virtually every speech made by Modi and his Cabinet, and made a key part of every legislative effort. A deeper analysis of the Modi government’s actions however, reveal dissonance. While Modi and other government leaders espouse values of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, major legislation continues promoting neoliberalism. This neoliberal agenda includes as a key example, the recent agricultural legislation proposing a dismantling of state support to the agricultural sector. The protests have led to significant protests all over India. The policies are a far cry from the kind of self-reliance that Indians are typically accustomed to.

So, why did Prime Minister Modi and the BJP first make the drastic transition to self-reliance? And then, beneath the rhetoric, why did they continue to adhere to neoliberal policies?

We highlight several factors that may have shaped the government’s agenda this past year and left an indelible mark on Prime Minister Modi’s rhetoric as well as action in one of the most critical years in

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, “Press Release Note on Estimates of Gross Domestic Product for the Second Quarter (July-Sept 2020-2021).” Government of India, November 27, 2020. [https://mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/416359/PRESS\\_NOTE-Q2\\_2020-211606480008567.pdf/f2b98a11-a06d-8b6f-6f37-621f33ca8f25#:~:text=\(JULY%2DSEPTEMBER\)%20OF%202020%2D21&text=GDP%20at%20Constant%20\(2011%2D12,growth%20in%20Q2%202019%2D20](https://mospi.gov.in/documents/213904/416359/PRESS_NOTE-Q2_2020-211606480008567.pdf/f2b98a11-a06d-8b6f-6f37-621f33ca8f25#:~:text=(JULY%2DSEPTEMBER)%20OF%202020%2D21&text=GDP%20at%20Constant%20(2011%2D12,growth%20in%20Q2%202019%2D20)

Indian history. The first influence is economics—declining and stalling productivity levels created the impetus for reform, particularly in agriculture, which suffers from enormous inefficiencies and employs more than half the Indian labor force. The second is the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent lockdown—which exacerbated the already faltering economy and put the entire country under significant strain. The third is political—the pandemic increased the influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization who Modi had to appease.

Overall, in a deepening economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Modi's government chose to re-appropriate the idea of self-reliance, a theme intertwined with Indian independence from Western influence, to appease its supporters. However, the realities of India's economic crisis have instead yielded a new and convoluted form of self-reliance in "Atman Nirbhar Abhiyan Bharat," which in reality attempts to prioritize Indian leverage in the global economy, without properly supporting the vulnerable who have suffered as a result of both crises.

We support our arguments about Prime Minister Modi's shift to self-reliance through text and sentiment analysis of Modi's nearly 1500 public speeches. Specifically, we have analyzed the frequency of terms surrounding 'reliance' and 'globalization,' as well as the frequency of speeches compared with the COVID-19 rate in India. We believe this data set provides insight on the way Prime Minister Modi hopes to frame his domestic policy agenda to both his constituents and the world. It exposes patterns in the way he presents policy initiatives, such as move towards self-reliance. Analysis of the data substantiates our argument and paints a clear picture of how the pandemic has changed Prime Minister Modi's view on globalization vs. self-reliance.

### **Modi's Economic Promise Falters**

Modi was elected as PM in 2014 largely for his bold economic vision. He almost immediately implemented the "Make in India" campaign, an attempt to bring foreign investment into the country to boost Indian manufacturing and create jobs to harness India's growing working-age population. In 2016, the government announced a radical liberalization of India's FDI regime through the easing of restrictions on investment, and embrace of retail. Amazon, Ikea and Walmart (through a subsidiary, Flipkart) celebrated—their moment had finally arrived.

In 2018 at the Davos Economic Summit, Modi made an impassioned plea for nations to resist those who decry the rise of globalization. "Forces of protectionism are raising their heads against globalization. They want to reverse its flow." He even quoted Gandhi, stating that "I don't want the windows of my house to be closed from all directions. I want the winds of cultures of all countries to enter my house with aplomb and go out also." He even went so far as to equate protectionism with terrorism.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 3, at its peak in 2018, nearly 1% of PM Modi's speech text were globalization-based terms.

At first glance, some of Prime Minister Modi's achievements in his first term as PM are quite impressive. In the time that he has been in office, India's GDP per-capita, in PPP adjusted international dollars, has

---

<sup>2</sup> "Prime Minister's Statement on the Subject "Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World" in the World Economic Forum (January 23, 2018)." MEA: Statements : Speeches & Statements. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 23, 2018. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl%2F29378%2FPrime%2BMinisters%2BKeynote%2BSpeech%2Bat%2BPlenary%2BSession%2Bof%2BWorld%2BEconomic%2BForum%2BDavos%2BJanuary%2B23%2B2018>.

grown from \$5,465 to \$7,034, an increase of nearly 30%. Between 2014—2017, which corresponds to the first half of Modi’s term, India shot up the rankings World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business index, now approaching the upper quartile of countries.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look at the economic record however, suggests a more complex reality. In the year after he first came to power, FDI increased from 1.6 percent of GDP to 2.1 percent in a single year. But that increase was not sustainable. FDI has mostly declined since 2015, remaining well below 2% of its GDP.<sup>4</sup> International investors continue to face barriers in investing in India. Between 2018 and 2019, India terminated approximately 60 bilateral investment treaties after being sued by more than 20 foreign investors in Investor-State Dispute Settlements.<sup>5</sup> The government of India’s efforts to dismantle the protections and assurances for FDI in these treaties were not without reproach—as Figure 4 shows, foreign investors were contemporaneously losing confidence that India would be a safe destination for their capital.<sup>6</sup>

Large domestic policy mistakes also left their mark. The demonetisation policy launched in November 2016, which immediately cancelled ₹500 and ₹1,000 banknotes (unless they were deposited in a bank account and exchanged for new notes) was intended to curb illegal cash holdings in the country. In reality however, the poor implementation of the policy was followed by prolonged cash shortages and considerable economic disruption throughout the country, with little ultimate effect. In 2018, the rollout of the GST program was similarly problematic. As a World Bank report noted, it was too complex, and even after the reform, India had the second-highest tax rate among a sample of 115 countries.<sup>7</sup>

Though overall GDP-per-capita has increased in Narendra Modi’s term, the pace of economic growth has been slowing considerably, especially from its recent high in Q1 of 2018.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, agriculture in particular has been in a crisis for a long time. The sector employs more than 65 percent of India’s total workforce but adds just 16 percent to the Indian economy. The average Indian farmer owns just 2 acres of land, very little capital equipment and has chronic livelihood insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

This data clearly indicates that even before COVID-19, Modi would have had ample reason to consider reorienting his economic policies to recapture India’s previous ceiling-shattering growth. On the surface,

---

<sup>3</sup> “Ease of Doing Business Rankings.” World Bank. *World Bank Group*, 2021.

<https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.

<sup>4</sup> “World Development Indicators.” DataBank. *World Bank Group*, 2020.

<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.

<sup>5</sup> Ranjan, Prabhash, *India and Bilateral Investment Treaties: Refusal, Acceptance, Backlash* (May 9, 2019).

Prabhash Ranjan, *India and Bilateral Investment Treaties: Refusal, Acceptance, Backlash*, Oxford University Press, 2019, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3417082>.

<sup>6</sup> “Economic Data.” *The Global Economy*. Accessed March 15, 2020.

<https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/download-data.php>.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank (2018), “Implementation of India’s Goods and Services Tax : Design and International Comparison.

Washington, D.C. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/918831542619297197/pdf/GST-final-IDU.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> “GDP Growth (Annual %) - India.” DataBank. *World Bank Group*, 2020.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=IN>.

<sup>9</sup> De Roy, S, “Economic reforms and agricultural growth in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 52, no. 9 (March 2017): 67-72, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2017/9/special-articles/economic-reforms-and-agricultural-growth-india.html>.

Modi's pre-COVID economic record may have seemed impressive, but a closer look reveals a more complicated and complete picture. As the pandemic struck, Modi's vision changed dramatically.

### **The Pandemic and The Lockdown**

During the first few weeks of COVID spreading across India, Modi and the BJP found themselves in a quagmire. Just a week earlier, Prime Minister Modi was hugging President Trump, renewing his vows of 'development' and 'globalization' as the keys to success for India. However, as COVID-19 spread across the globe, the wells of bilateral support quickly dried up, as countries began closing their borders and looking inwards. The message of development on a global scale suddenly rang hollow, and as March came around, Modi, once the aspirational 'CEO of India,' had to become the restrictive parental figure. On March 22nd, Modi ordered a day-long *Janata Curfew* ("Citizen's Curfew").

Realizing the gravity of the situation, on March 24th, Modi hastily announced the start of one of the strictest lockdowns that the world had yet seen in response to the emergence of COVID-19. The lockdown was to last for 21 days, but was then extended until May 3rd. During this time, Modi substituted policy with theatre; he would ask all citizens to go outside at the same time and give 5-minute standing ovations to the 'Corona warriors,' or switch off the lights and lamps at home for 9 minutes in solidarity. Regardless, compared to many other nations who at the time were still questioning the gravity of the disease, India seemed on the right track.

But soon, India's population, especially the most vulnerable, began feeling the impacts of both the pandemic and the lockdown. The severe economic impacts of the lockdown are driven by the restrictions themselves, but also the constant uncertainty and shifting goalposts. Policies were designed quickly and implemented without detailed instructions. The lockdown was imposed within four hours of an initial announcement, creating panic conditions for the country, particularly the poor who lived in conditions where social distancing was virtually impossible.<sup>10</sup> As people scrambled to find some safety, many migrant workers fled back to their rural hometowns, sometimes on foot, spreading the disease with them. The government instituted harsh punishments for people and businesses who defied the orders, but there was considerable uncertainty about which industries and retail establishments could operate or how people could survive within the constraints that were imposed.

The rapid deterioration of conditions, particularly for poor and vulnerable migrant workers eventually triggered some realizations. At the end of March, Modi apologized for the hard times that fell upon many Indians, particularly the poor, though he never explicitly tied it to his own actions. Modi had to make sure that the failures of the lockdown would not be pinned on his administration's handling of it, but rather just the inevitable circumstances of the situation at hand. As he stated, "I know some of you will be angry with me. But these tough measures were needed to win this battle."

However, instead of a policy response, there was deafening silence. As seen in Figure 1, the prolific public speaker Modi spoke only four times during April and May, a drastic drop paralleling the rise of COVID cases. In fact, a few months in, India had the third most COVID-19 cases in the world, just behind Brazil and the United States. By the end of August, the total case number topped 3 million and

---

<sup>10</sup> Deshpande, A. Early Effects of Lockdown in India: Gender Gaps in Job Losses and Domestic Work. *Ind. J. Labour Econ.* 63 (2020): 87–90, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00261-2>.

with India producing the highest number of daily new cases in the world, topping 70,000 daily. In this time, Modi and his top aides in the BJP were scrambling to develop a coherent national response. Not only did they need to respond to the crisis at hand, they also had to promote national unity. The platforms that had brought them to win the 2014 and 2019 elections simply could not suffice. Moreover, the lockdown itself created massive challenges. Nearly 10 million urban migrant workers in urban cities were forced to rapidly move back to their villages, in a large reverse-migration.

Only at the end of April did Modi announce “Atman Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan,” a new economic policy of self-reliance that contrasted significantly from Modi’s previous rhetoric. So, why was Modi quiet for so long? And, in the end, why did he choose to radically transform his economic platform? We argue that this was because of the RSS.

### **The RSS Saves the Day**

Narendra Modi’s electoral victory in 2014 was not just a personal achievement, but a triumphant moment for the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS)—the 93-year old organization to which he had dedicated most of his adult life prior to entering politics in his home state of Gujarat.

Since its founding, the RSS has regarded India as a Hindu nation and envisions *Dharma* as the foundation of national unity. Service, particularly by the youth, is held in high regard.<sup>11</sup> As a member-driven social organization, the RSS has never endorsed a specific economic ideology. In the early days of the organization, leaders such as Hedgewar, Gowalkar and Upadhyay strongly emphasized the role of the state and favored central planning, restrictions on industry and the promotion of labor-intensive, rather than capital-intensive systems of production, particularly in the rural sector.

In 1990, the RSS chose to informally back the newly-formed BJP. Though it would later adopt a pro-market neoliberal economic agenda, the BJP had a similarly anti-secular agenda of consolidating the Hindu majority population of India. Soon, the BJP succeeded in rising to power. In two electoral terms, the party invested in domestic infrastructure, undertook bold reforms in the telecommunications sector, privatized many state-owned enterprises, and opened up more financial markets. Though the BJP was voted out in 2004, the party’s pivot to pro-market economics remained relevant, and Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi seized the moment. Even as a long-time RSS member, Modi pivoted to BJP rhetoric and became a champion of neoliberal economics, fully embracing trade, privatization, and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in his home state.

Mr. Modi’s embrace of globalization did not always fit with the RSS agenda. In fact, they have been openly skeptical. Many RSS-affiliates such as the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch (SJM) and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the RSS’s labor union affiliate, have continued to believe in a more state-controlled economy. These organizations reacted intensely to the 2016 FDI liberalization as a “betrayal of trust” and even an “anti-national” But, on account of his enormous popularity and success at the ballot-box, the RSS pragmatically refrained from overt opposition.

---

<sup>11</sup> Even today, the RSS website quotes their founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, as follows: “*Strength, it should be remembered, comes only through organization. It is therefore the duty of every Hindu to do his best to consolidate the Hindu society. The Sangh is just carrying out this supreme task...To mould the minds of our youth towards that end is the supreme aim of the Sangh.*”

However, the RSS noticed his increasingly chequered economic record, and their support, though still present in the 2019 election, was significantly less enthusiastic than in 2014.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the RSS' criticisms were taken more seriously by the Modi government. In 2019 for example, the Government of India imposed sudden new rules for e-commerce that was dominated by foreign entrants such as Amazon and Walmart: they were no longer allowed to offer customers exclusive products such as smartphones, and faced restrictions in the kinds of discounts that they were permitted to offer.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Modi's government has long planned to privatize Air India, the national airline, but the SJM and BMS oppose it. The RSS has been quoted as saying that if Air India is sold, it should be run by an Indian firm, not a foreign airline.<sup>14</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, however, may have changed the power dynamic completely, creating an opening for the organizational strengths of the RSS to become relevant and support the government at a key moment. In executing the mass movement of migrant workers, vulnerable victims of the sudden lockdown in cities, Modi was forced to rely on the RSS and its massive volunteer base. Though this reliance on the RSS is not overtly marketed, a May 30th special edition of the *Kamal Sandesh*, the national mouthpiece of the BJP, brings this linkage to light.<sup>15</sup> In it, BJP president and former 'RSS man' Jagan Prakash Nadda praises the "BJP *karyakartas* (workers)," borrowing a term often used to describe RSS members across the country, for "carrying out our mammoth relief works at various levels." He directly thanks 825,000 workers for distributing ration kits, food packets, and face masks, as well as 830,000 "assigned to look after sick and elderly people while making 5,390,000 people donate to the PM Cares fund."

Clearly, the backbone of Modi's COVID-19 lockdown were these foot-soldiers. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi's previous strategy of having two separate faces—an "outward looking" face that is a champion of pro-market investment and an "inward looking" face that stands for Hindu social protection—became suddenly unworkable as all eyes looked inwards. Since Modi relied on the RSS' apparatus and support, the organization's leaders found a moment to put forward an alternate view for Indian economics. In developing his policy response, Modi was forced to return to RSS values, specifically that of self-reliance. In fact, just two days after Modi first introduced the "self-reliance" term, on April 26th the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat called for a return to "Swadeshi (self-reliant) behavior," indicating the roots of the transition.<sup>16</sup> So, why is self-reliance so important to the RSS?

### **The Echoes of Swadeshi and a New Self-Reliance**

The concept of self-reliance has a timeless resonance in India, as Indians have often turned inward in moments of change. In fact, the ideal of self-reliance was at the very core of the Indian freedom

---

<sup>12</sup> Andersen, W., & Damle, S. (2018). *The RSS: A view to the inside*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.

<sup>13</sup> Iyengar, Rishi. "Amazon and Walmart face new threats in India," *CNN Business*. Feb. 1, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/31/tech/amazon-walmart-india-ecommerce-restrictions/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Frayer, Lauren., & Furkan Latif Khan. "The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise of Hindu Nationalism In India." *NPR*, May 3, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>.

<sup>15</sup> "Towards Atmannirbhar Bharat: One Year of Modi Government 2.0," *Kamal Sandesh*, May 30, 2020 <http://www.kamalsandesh.org/pub/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2020/06/aatmnirbharbharat-english.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> "RSS Chief Calls for Swadeshi to Combat Corona," *Outlook India*, April 26 2020. <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/rss-chief-calls-for-swadeshi-to-combat-corona/1815410>

movement. The best example is the *Swadeshi* Movement, which literally means “own country.” Often known as the “Make in India” campaign, the Swadeshi Movement took flight in 1905 during the colonial era, when the British made the unpopular decision to partition the Indian state of Bengal. The Swadeshi strategy encouraged Indians to solely focus on the development and purchase of Indian-made products in an economic attack on the British. The campaign worked. Eventually, the British were forced to reassess their policy and bring Bengal back together.

As an anti-colonial concept, self-reliance signaled the ability of India to thrive without interference from the West. Swadeshi as a strategy continued to inform and influence Indian revolutionaries throughout the freedom movement. For example, Gandhi launched the non-cooperation movement against the British in 1920, drawing on strategies from the earlier Swadeshi movement: this protest promoted self-reliance by asking Indians to reject British influences, spin *khadi* (a fabric that had also become a revolutionary symbol, and buy Indian-made goods only. The movement’s implication is clear: Indians did not need help from the British to run their country.

The rhetoric of self-reliant India did not pause there. Post-World War II, the Indian government reappropriated the Swadeshi movement to promote economic development. As industrialized countries mobilized their economies, India decided to cast their 5-year plans for economic growth as a natural extension of the Swadeshi movement. By combining their agrarian economy with rapid industrialization, India claimed another success for the Swadeshi concept.

Therefore, the invocation of the concept of self-reliance during a highly repressive lockdown can be understood as a deliberate effort to maintain national unity in the presence of a significant threat to the prevailing economic and social order. In fact, in his first address to the country in the new year, Modi emphasized “vocal for local” and implored Indians to reduce their reliance on imported goods and buy products that are made “with the sweat of their own fellow Indians,” directly echoing the sentiments of Swadeshi.

Like many Indian leaders before him, Prime Minister Modi is yet again reappropriating Swadeshi. However, as a result of Modi’s ambitions and the current conditions, this avatar of self-reliance is drastically different. Instead of shying away from the Western economic system, this new Atman Nirbhar Bharat looks to instead turn development and interconnectedness as a self-serving strategy. This is evident in remarks from the Commerce Minister, who explained that “India should be seen as a dependable partner and reliable friend in the world market, particularly when the global supply chains [...] We should talk from the position of strength, be competitive, and provide quality products to the world.”<sup>17</sup> The focus of policy initiatives include greater labor productivity for Indian workers, so that they may improve “firm and industry level competitiveness.”<sup>18</sup> As Financial Express puts it, Atman Nirbhar Bharat is a call for *entrepreneurship*, rather than protectionism.

---

<sup>17</sup> Singh, Harsha Vardhana. “India's ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ Vision Requires Open, Not Protectionist, Policies.” Atlantic Council. *Atlantic Council*, December 22, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/indias-atmanirbhar-bharat-vision-requires-open-not-protectionist-policies/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Atmanirbhar Bharat Campaign Is a Call to Foster Entrepreneurship Not Protectionism: Venkaiah Naidu.” The Financial Express. *The Financial Express*, July 5, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/atmanirbhar-bharat-campaign-is-a-call-to-foster-entrepreneurship-not-protectionism-venkaiah-naidu/2013875/>.

So, how does the BJP's new form of self-reliance square up with the RSS' vision for Hindu economics? In theory, it does not. Self-reliance and the RSS preference for state-planning is in stark contrast with global supply chains. However, this new model of self-reliance is born from reacting to two crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the longer economic downturn.

For example, the renewed interest in agriculture and the vulnerability of farmers has been a priority in these circles. Although the RSS typically favors state-led political economy approaches, they appear to approve of the agricultural reform package and are actively encouraging dialogue between farmers and the state.<sup>19</sup> The framework of self-reliance has been used to pass dramatic new legislation in India. On September 20, Prime Minister Modi remarked that “the agricultural sector of the country, our farmers, our villages are the very basis of Atman Nirbhar Bharat, a self-reliant India. If they remain strong then the foundation of Atman Nirbhar Bharat will remain strong.”

This new legislation sought to dismantle the decades-old state involvement in agricultural markets, reducing farmer reliance on state-set minimum support prices, and expanding opportunities for farmers to sell their output to the private sector.<sup>20</sup> The new framework however, limits farmers' access to formal courts for resolving disputes, eliminates corporate restrictions on land purchases and permits the stockpiling of essential commodities. Many farmers are protesting the bill on the grounds that it is tantamount to the privatization of agriculture and it increases the vulnerability of small farmers who have weak negotiating power in private markets. This, many would argue, is far from the call for Swadeshi and self-reliance.

### **The Road Ahead**

India is of course hardly alone in having a complicated policy response to the global pandemic. In terms of global economic crises, COVID-19 seems to be the perfect example as a majority of countries have seen precipitous falls in their exports and GDPs with little indication of full recoveries any time soon.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, there have in fact been global indications of moves towards more inward-looking policies. Aside from India, countries such as Canada and parts of the E.U., namely France and Italy, have put stricter regulations on foreign investment.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, at the start of the pandemic, many countries focused on securing their own supply of medical or protective equipment after hold-ups in global supply chains led to worldwide shortages.<sup>23</sup> However, aside from one-off policies, there have been no other concerted efforts to turn inward in the same way that Modi is pushing India to do.

---

<sup>19</sup> “RSS-backed farmers' body supports govt's farm laws.” *Economic Times* (New Delhi), December 5, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/rss-backed-farmers-body-supports-govts-farm-laws/articleshow/79571944.cms>

<sup>20</sup> The three bills are: (1) Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, the (2) Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and the (3) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ortiz-Mena, Antonio. “Covid-19 and Protectionism: The Worst May Be Yet To Come.” *Brink*, July 23, 2020. <https://www.brinknews.com/covid-19-protectionism-the-worst-may-be-yet-to-come-nationalism-trade-supply-chains/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Solís, Mireya. “The Post COVID-19 World: Economic Nationalism Triumphant?” Brookings. The Brookings Institution, July 10, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/07/10/the-post-covid-19-world-economic-nationalism-triumphant/>.



Some countries, namely India's neighbors Bangladesh and Pakistan, are focusing even more on gaining the support of developed nations and international NGOs in order to help them out of the pandemic. They face similar challenges as economies that are closely tied to the U.S. and E.U. through the garment industry, as well as public healthcare systems that are severely lacking in terms of being able to handle their massive and growing populations.<sup>24</sup> While Bangladesh and Pakistan have prioritized providing aid to those most harmed by lockdowns, they are using foreign aid as a means towards this aid, rather than focusing inward.<sup>25</sup>

Modi and India's transition to a new and convoluted form of self-reliance reveals various weaknesses. It shows that, despite their rhetoric, the BJP is deeply concerned with India's economic performance. It also indicates that, as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown response, the RSS has significantly more influence in BJP and Indian politics. And, perhaps most tellingly, it shows how government policies have continued to harm vulnerable populations—whether it be migrant workers or farmers—who have not received enough support or care to help weather these challenging times.

*Siddharth Muchhal is a recent graduate from Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, having majored in Science, Technology and International Affairs with a certificate in Global Business.*

*Ria Pradhan is a second-year student at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service studying International Political Economy. She is also pursuing minors in International Development and Women's and Gender Studies.*

*Connor Brennan is a third-year student at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service majoring in International Political Economy and minoring in Mathematics.*

*Joyce Yang is a second-year student at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service majoring in Science, Technology, and International Affairs with a concentration in Security and minoring in Women's and Gender Studies.*

*Shareen Joshi is an Associate Professor of International Development at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. Her research mainly focuses on poverty alleviation and demographic change in South Asia using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. She has worked closely with the World Bank, the Government of India and many non-profits organizations. She holds a PhD in Economics from Yale University.*

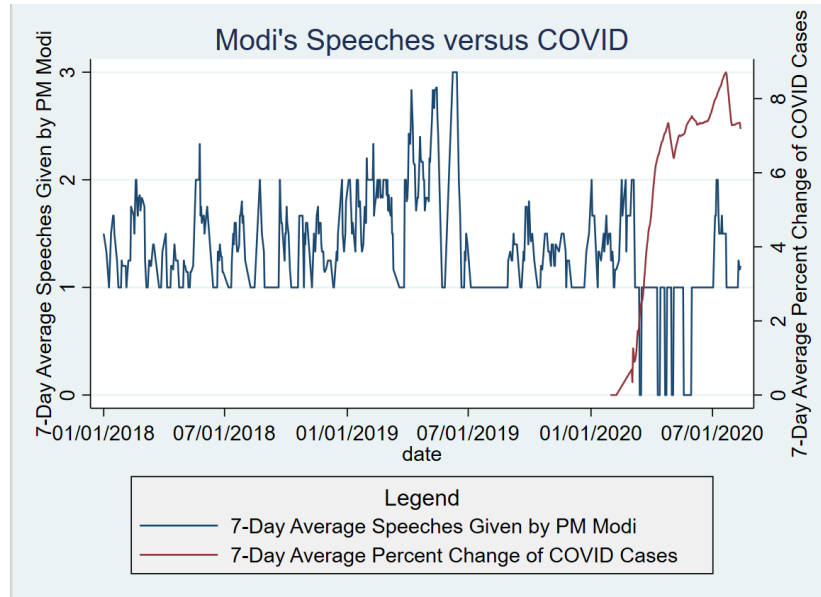
---

<sup>24</sup> Amit, Sajid, "Coronavirus and Impact on the Bangladesh Economy: Assessing the Damage of the Black Swan of 2020," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, no. 9(15) (August 2020), <https://apjif.org/2020/15/Amit.html>.  
Saleem, Aasim. "How the COVID-19 Crisis Is Affecting Pakistan's Economy: DW: 23.07.2020." DW.COM. Deutsche Welle, July 23, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-covid-19-crisis-is-affecting-pakistans-economy/a-54292705#:~:text=The%20pandemic%20has%20also%20taken%20a%20devastating%20blow%20on%20the%20Pakistani%20economy.&text=When%20Khan%20took%20power%20in,in%20the%20past%20two%20years>.

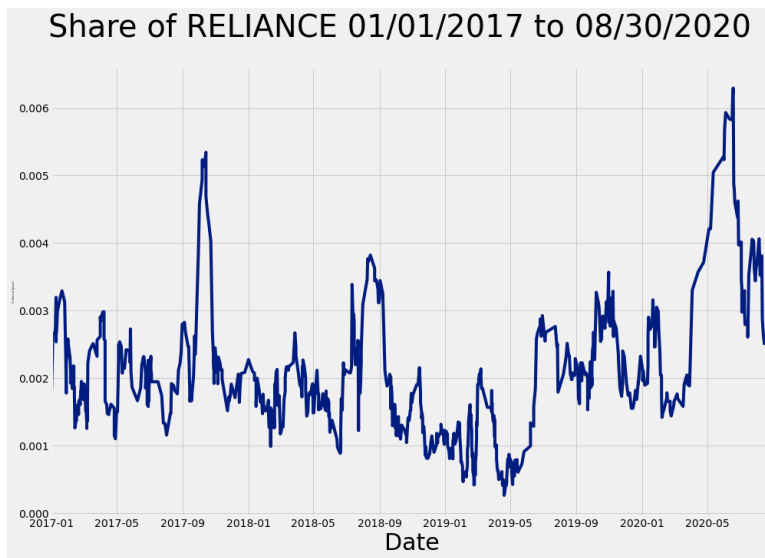
<sup>25</sup> Younus, Uzair, Sofyan Yusufi, and Safiya Ghori-Ahmad. "Can Pakistan Handle the Double Crisis of COVID-19 and a Struggling Economy?" Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council, December 22, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/can-pakistan-handle-the-double-crisis-of-covid-19-and-a-struggling-economy/>.

## Appendix

**Figure 1: Rate of PM Modi's Speeches vs. COVID-19 Cases in India**

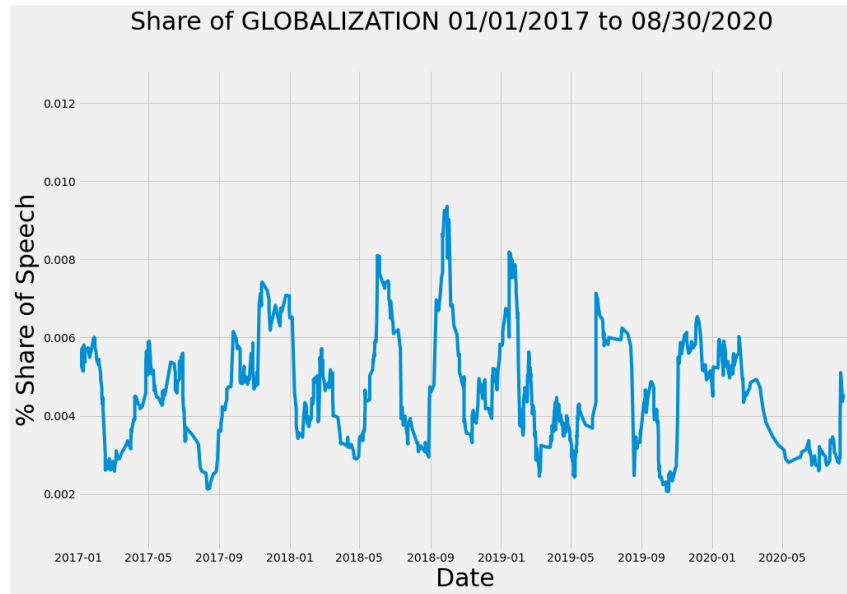


**Figure 2: Share of 'Reliance' Terms in Speeches from January 2017 to August 2020**



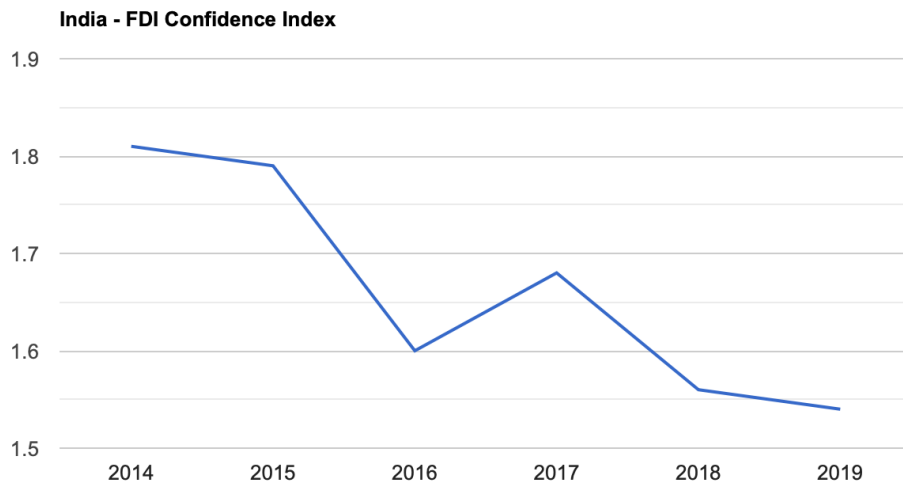
'Reliance' Dictionary of Terms: ('atman', 'reliant', 'reliance', 'resilience', 'sufficient', 'domestic', 'swadesh', 'collective', 'local', 'responsibility', 'self')

**Figure 3: Share of ‘Globalization’ Terms in Speeches from January 2017 to August 2020**



‘Globalization’ Dictionary of Terms: (‘trade’, ‘saving,’ ‘treaty,’ ‘agreement,’ ‘import’, ‘export,’ ‘exchange’ )

**Figure 4: India’s FDI Confidence Index during PM Modi’s administration (2014-2019)<sup>26</sup>**



*Data is only available until 2019 as India dropped out of Kearney’s FDI Confidence Index in 2020*

<sup>26</sup> “Economic Data.” *The Global Economy*. Accessed March 15, 2020. <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/download-data.php>.