

# Independence Day, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2017

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70 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi led India to freedom. During the freedom struggle since about 1920, Gandhi had placed great emphasis on *khadi* and *swaraj*. Indeed, he said that the two were practically synonymous.

What did Gandhi mean by “swaraj”? The components of *khadi* and *swaraj* in his view were self-reliance, self-rule and self-restraint. *Khadi* was important because Gandhi believed that each of us should make our own clothes. By self-rule, Gandhi meant freedom from government control. Interestingly, he was opposed not only to foreign government but also to national government. He wanted decentralisation with control at the village level. A downside of such decentralisation is the likelihood of conflicts as neighbours take differing, incompatible decisions. Here is where self-restraint is important. There is a famous American saying: “Your right to swing your arms ends just where the other man’s nose begins.” Gandhi’s self-restraint is intended to ensure harmony between neighbours.

In the 70 years since, India has changed and developed dramatically. For eg, from 1951 to 2011, the GDP of India increased 18-fold, life expectancy doubled from 33 to 66 years, female literacy increased from 9% to 65%. Every decade has witnessed dramatic changes. India today is very different from the India of Gandhi’s time.

It is natural to ask: “How is Gandhi’s *swaraj* relevant today?” With globalisation, many of us are intricately connected to foreign countries for jobs, for goods, for markets, for information, for entertainment. People routinely migrate to distant parts of India for studies and work. Mob violence, rape, murder seem to be the order of the day. Are self-reliance, self-rule and self-restraint relics of a bygone era?

While I don’t have a definite answer, I believe Gandhi’s ideals are still relevant today, albeit in modified forms. Let me hazard some guesses.

*Self-reliance*: as a nation we should have the *capability* to develop and produce everything that we routinely need. We continue to import and trade, but we are not in danger of being held hostage by others.

*Self-rule*: Lord Acton wrote in 1887 “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Wisely, our founding fathers made India a federal democracy. “Federal” implies that a lot of power devolves to States and even to local bodies, the Panchayats. The essence of democracy is the power of the people over the rulers. It is our duty in a democracy to question our government.

*Self-restraint*: In a populous country such as India, practically everything we do impinges on someone else. It is not practicable or desirable for the police to watch over our every action. Self-restraint is key to a harmonious society.

In IITs, we are highly privileged. We enjoy very generous financial support from public funds. So, we have a greater responsibility to excel. The Nation looks to the scientists and engineers in IITs to provide the technology that it needs to make India self-reliant. The HSS researchers of IIT can provide better answers and advice on how we can benefit from Gandhi’s wisdom in today’s and tomorrow’s world.

I wish you a happy Independence Day and a fruitful struggle to deserve and preserve our self-reliance, self-rule and self-restraint.