

# Autonomy on the Market: China and India Change Tracks

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In the most modern and dynamic cities of India and China, a similarly strange phenomenon is taking place. The trendy shops of Bombay and Bangalore display the homespun cloth advocated by Gandhi, while the chic boutiques of Shanghai and Beijing feature Maoist art from the Cultural Revolution. In both countries the nation's founders have become fashion statements.

This is particularly ironic since both Mao and Gandhi were totally opposed to the cosmopolitanism of the global market place. While there are extreme differences dividing the two leaders — one was a guerilla fighter the other the leader of a non-violent struggle — India's and China's national founders had remarkably similar ideologies. Both Mao and Gandhi strongly believed in a form of national autonomy understood as strict self-reliance. For both, this notion of autonomy was rooted in economic protectionism, which required that their country be closed to the outside world.

Gandhi called this ideal of autonomy *swadeshi* and maintained that this form of self-reliance was the key to self-rule (*swadeshi* would bring *swaraj*). In particular, Gandhi stressed the self-sufficiency of India's villages and advocated on behalf of indigenous production. The symbol of Gandhi's *swadeshi* campaign was *khadi* (home spun cloth) and Gandhi is often pictured sitting at the spinning wheel wearing nothing but a white *khadi* loincloth. Gandhi believed that this self-reliance at the local village level should stretch to the entire country. It was essential for India's independence, he argued, that it focus inwards and shut its doors to global trade.

In China the ideal of autonomy understood as self-reliance is known as *zili gengsheng* (literally "one's own strength"). Developed in Yanan during the founding period of Chinese communism, *zili gengsheng* is seen as one of the key pillars of Mao Zedong thought. The idea holds that a strong independent China demands a socio-economic model that is free from foreign influence and based instead on inward strength.

Yet, this notion of autonomy rooted in economic self-reliance necessarily sacrifices the autonomy of culture. Thus, in the early years of independence, culture in both India and China was subordinated to the dictates of economic ideals.

Gandhi, for example, pleaded with his followers not to be swayed by a sense of fashion or style but rather to choose homespun cloth through a sense of duty and national devotion. Mao was even more explicit, insisting that all art, literature, and other forms of culture serve the proletarian cause. This sacrifice of the autonomy of culture to socio-economic ideals reached its height during the Cultural Revolution when anything that did not conform to the proper ideology was forbidden and destroyed.

In both India and China, the insular policies of isolation pursued out of an adherence to notions of self-reliance led, ultimately, to crises. In both countries the solution was globalization. India and China eventually abandoned their founders' conception of autonomy by embracing economic liberalization and opening their doors to the world.

In China this occurred in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping reacting, as he explained, to the lessons learnt during the Cultural Revolution, reversed decades of Maoist policy and set the country on a path of openness and reform. India followed over a decade later when in 1991 the government — faced with near bankruptcy — was forced, overnight, to dismantle much of the protectionist bureaucracy that supported the economic self-reliance of the state. Contrary to what their founders believed, it was in abandoning ideas of economic autonomy that China and India started to rise.

As these two giant neighbours grow richer and increasingly influential their founders have become potent cultural figures. Mao and Gandhi, who are now mostly stripped of ideology, have become popular symbols amongst local urban youth and foreign tourists.

Both Indians and Chinese, while they have clearly abandoned the traditional ideal of self-reliance based on economic protectionism, still persist in their belief in autonomy. Governments in both countries insist that there is no contradiction between *swadeshi* or *zili gengsheng* and global trade. What has changed, however, is that now instead of expressing an economic policy these ideas of autonomy have entered the cultural realm becoming expressions of national pride.