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Book Review - Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Policy by Nagesh Prabhu

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ABSTRACT

'Middle Class, Media, and Modi' delves into the rise of the BJP and Prime Minister Modi from the standpoint of the middle class, eschewed from admiring or noxious attacks. It aims to explain Modi's rise to power without adhering to any ideological point of view. The book addresses a crucial void in our perception of the middle class and their political conduct, which has gotten little coverage. The author's goal is to show how the middle class became an important force in a strong democracy, as well as what led to the middle class's discontentment with the Congress and how it shifted to support Modi's ideology. Apart from that, it serves to demonstrate how Modi's brilliant management of mainstream and social media, whose primary audiences are the middle class, performed a pivotal role in his resounding victories.

Keywords: Middle Class, Media, Modi, BJP, Congress, Ideology

BOOK: Middle Class, Media and Modi: The Making of a New Electoral Policy

AUTHOR: Dr. Nagesh Prabhu

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"The spectacular victory of Narendra Modi and the BJP in 2014 and again in 2019 demands a nuanced exploration of the factors that led to it. Though the role of the middle class and the media in the making of what is called the 'Modi wave' is often talked about, a clear-eyed and unbiased look at how they transformed the political landscape in post-liberalization India is still wanting", scans the tome's snippet.

"Middle Class, Media and Modi – The Making Of A New Electoral Policy" by Nagesh Prabhu is significant for three major reasons – first, that it provides a chronological understanding of the factors that led to the victory of Narendra Modi and the BJP; second, that

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it highlights the most understudied aspect, the 'middle class', that enabled Modi's victories twice and; third, that it is inscribed by an eminent journalist.

Dr. Nagesh Prabhu is a political analyst and the Deputy Editor of 'The Hindu' in Bengaluru with a Ph.D. in Political Science. An academe and a journalist for over a quarter of a century, he writes extensively on political economy issues. He is also an author of another book named *"Reflective Shadows: Political Economy of World Bank Lending to India."*

The 2014 and 2019 Indian Lok Sabha elections sparked political debate on a bunch of diverse concerns in the Indian context. The widespread use of social media, the hiring of specific organizations to assist with IT and electoral mapping, RSS support, the party's hindutva agenda and the sum of money expended on campaigns were all seen in a fresh way as their significance and ramifications escalated by great strides.

The factors that contributed to the NDA's election victories in 2014 and 2019 are the same as I stated previously. However, a thorough study of why each one of these factors aided the Bharatiya Janata Party and eventually contributed to their victory has long been lacking. Furthermore, the most pervasive yet silent element – the position of the middle-class – is underdiagnosed. This book is a relevant commentary that provides a conceptual and chronicled background and demonstrates how Narendra Modi and the BJP successfully managed the middle-class and the media to retain power twice. India's middle class draws media coverage on specific occasions, for example, when central or state policies tend to enhance prices of petrol, basic goods, or electronic devices, causing inflation, or when banks raise the interest rate on home loans, or possibly during elections.²

Much has been written about India's middle-class, both in terms of consumption and lifestyle. However, the role of the middle class's prominence, power in shaping public opinion, ideological leanings, and political assertiveness in fundamentally changing the country's political culture, especially after the implementation of liberal economic policies, has received little attention.³ The book delves into the ramifications of India's middle-class rise, as well as its position in national politics. The book chronicles the rise of the BJP and its subsequent journey since the 1980s.

It examines how the Indian middle-class, which was formerly considered politically apathetic, has evolved into a significant player in Indian politics. If the emerging middle class played a

² Nagesh Prabhu, Why the Indian middle class gravitates towards Modi, THE HINDU BUSINESSLINE (Dec. 07, 2020), <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/read/why-the-indian-middle-class-gravitates-towards-modi/article33269351.ece>

³ *Ibid*

significant role in the political results of the 2014 and 2019 elections, it has also altered India's perception of its own and how the rest of the world perceives India. Modi's command of the headlines and social media has been instrumental in his resounding victories. All of this and more is revealed in the book.

Dr. Prabhu in a very critical manner debunked the stereotype that the middle-class is not politically conscious or engaged. Although the Congress gave birth to the new middle class, they failed to grasp their goals. The BJP has effectively energized the new middle class, and Narendra Modi, who has consistently described himself as a member of the middle class, has developed a new electoral politics.

'Middle Class, Media, and Modi' begins with a thorough theoretical overview of the middle class, including its scale, composition, and economic function. The author discusses about the various approaches emphasized by *Karl Marx* and *Max Weber* to study the middle class, both of which contribute to a better understanding of the importance of the middle-class in a country's democracy and economy. The author traced the historical origins of the Indian middle-class from the British Raj to the Post-Emergency era. The English educated civil servant class that once looked up to the colonial rulers for their income and social mobility gradually evolved into a class of disgruntled educated elites who wanted the freedom to govern their own land during the colonial era. With the formation of the Indian National Congress, a distinct divide emerged between the middle-class elite and the majority of the Indian population.

The middle-class's presence grew post-independence, its role grew as a result of Nehru's policies which intended to further uplift them. The book 'Middle Class, Media, and Modi' argues that during the emergency, the middle-class played an unprecedented role in supporting Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's reforms and acts – in a sense, the middle class protected their own interests.⁴

He examines the manner in which the Indian middle-class modified the political aura in the post-liberalization period. Owing to the fact that India's middle-class was always seen at forefront of the nation's economic narrative, it yearns for its own economic prosperity. While outlining the shift and the growth of middle-class under the regime of various Congress governments, Prabhu canvasses the character played by the middle-class in reforming the political culture as well as citing the explanations for the support to BJP in the last two

⁴ Sukanya Bhattacharya, Book Review: Middle Class, Media and Modi by Nagesh Prabhu, FEMINISM IN INDIA (Dec. 04, 2020), <https://feminisinindia.com/2020/12/04/book-review-middle-class-media-and-modi-by-nagesh-prabhu/>

elections. It was convincingly argued that as the middle class grew in size and gained access to social, digital, and print media, they became a crucial vote bank in elections, particularly in the turbulent election of 2014.

The tremendous rise and shine of the BJP has always been a debated subject and has always seen from the frame of reference of caste, religion, and especially the so-called agenda of promoting 'Hindutva'. However, with an emphasis on the middle class, this text melds a startlingly contemporary assessment. An undeviating knot has been established between Modi's victories, the media and the middle-class's collective endeavors in electoral politics.

While tracing the immediate incidents, Prabhu adduced: *'The 21-day nationwide lockdown to contain the spread Covid-19 pandemic brought to a grinding halt all businesses, factories, schools/colleges and public transportation in the world's second-most populous country. The losses caused for many businesses and the hardship faced by common people was acute but all endured under the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.'*

A substantial portion of the middle class warmly feted the groundbreaking move by the Prime Minister declared on March 24th, 2020 as well as the lights off-lamps on strategy. There is undoubtedly more and unseen underneath Modi's powerful and perspicacious disposition.

He went on to put down that *'Truly, he operates on those soft levers of the middle class and the media through his novel social engineering tools. The is deciphers the charisma that Modi wields on the middle class and the media through which he ascended the political ladder right from a Swayam Sevak to a Pradhan Sevak. The Modi techniques made the burgeoning Indian middle class increasingly leverage a slew of welfare and progressive policies/ programs initiated by his government during the last six years.'*

The spectacular pinnacle of the book is its examination of middle class's stance during the Nehru and Gandhi and their role in shaping the nation. Prabhu stated that though consecutive Congress-led governments' robust concentration on the poverty-eradication model with 'Garibi Hatao' as a campaign platform, they stood deafeningly silent on the concerns of the middle class. While claiming to be the "manufacturer" of this middle class via structural reforms under Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, PV Narasimha Rao in the 1990s, and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2004-14, the Congress failed to meet the expectations of this 500-million-plus population, thanks to the increasing service sector and increased female workforce.

The author analyzed the growth of new middle class during the last four decades besides outlining the fact that how the media altered the Indian demographic politics. Owing to

increased social mobility among the middle classes, there was a shrunk appeal of the anti-poverty schemes of the Congress in 2014 and 2019. With the change in the economic status, many of the people who were earlier disadvantaged, graduated to the middle class. There were many infrastructure projects, construction sectors, e-commerce firms, cab services and several security agencies that provided employment to the unemployed thereby lifting them up from poverty. The BJP was smart enough to climb upon the aspirations and consternation of the newly entered segment. Contrastingly, the Congress seemed befuddled and ineffective in placing hands of trust on the shoulders of those emerging demographic that arose during its own reign.

The book also discusses several programs launched by the Modi Government from the period of 2014-2019 and the effect of demonetization, GST and Ayushman Bharat and many more schemes launched for the welfare of the middle-class. The narrator in a very upbeat tone pointed: *'After consolidating his position in first term, Modi is implementing a long pending agenda of the party – abrogation of Article 370, implementing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, and construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya. After his second consecutive victory and bigger mandate, Modi is even stronger, and everything now is in his control. The Opposition, indeed, is in a state of despair. Politics apart, the Modi government has started identifying specific areas for focus in the economy to make India self-reliant to drive India's development journey to become a global leader. The Rs. 20 lakh crore economic package announced during the lockdown to boost the economy is seen from this perspective. The opportunity is ripe for now to use the available prowess for transforming the Indian economy and lifts millions of people out of poverty. If he can pull this off, he would surely go down in history as one the strongest leaders the country has seen.'*

The book's final chapters cover the BJP's and Modi's election campaigns and media strategies. Experts aided them, and careful preparation led to their electoral victory. Religious nationalism, national defense, surgical and aerial attacks, and other narratives have all been widely debated. There are sufficient insights into Modi's approach, from social engineering to voter communication, as well as explanations for the middle class rallying behind him to secure landmark wins in 2014 and 2019.

'Middle Class, Media, and Modi' is a fantastic account of the BJP and Modi's journey, emphasizing the importance of previously neglected newly emerging variables. Unlike other books in the area, this one examines politics from a class outlook rather than a conventional caste viewpoint, despite the fact that caste plays a significant role in politics. This book – with a foreword by *RS Deshpande*, former director of the 'Institute for Social and Economic Change'

in Bengaluru, is a must-read for everyone interested in learning how the middle class and the media propelled Modi to power. It will aid scholars of politics, media studies, and sociology in comprehending Modi's election "armory" and how he won.
