



## Great Indian Middle Class

*Pavan K. Varma*

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"Updated with a new introduction"--Cover.

## Great Indian Middle Class Details

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## From Reader Review Great Indian Middle Class for online ebook

### Hema Rajashekhar says

This is a must read for all Indians, particularly those who belong to the middle-class. Although the writing style is not so great, the author has a fine mind..he convincingly shows up the middle class as horribly selfish and insular.

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### Manish says

Starting off with a hypothesis behind the reason for which Nehru addressed the nation on the eve of independence in English, Pavan Varma goes on to trace the rise of the Indian middle class and its deep correlation with the changing times and corresponding ideologies of the decades following the Mahatma and Nehru. This is a highly recommended read to understand better the India we deal with day in and day out both consciously and unconsciously.

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### Aravind P says

*Watan ki fiker ker naadaan! moosibat aanay wali hai  
Teri berbaadiyon kay mashwaray hai aasmaanon may*

*Na samjho gay to mit jaaoo gay ai Hindoostaan waalo!  
Tumhaari daastaan tak bhi na hogi daastaano-n may - Iqbal*

This is how the book "The Great Indian Middle Class" by Pavan K Varma, started. I had many doubts clouding over my head, my conscience was waging war between 'Randian' selfishness against an individual's social relevance. I could remember only one phrase that engaged in this tussle - Middle Class. That's why I didn't hesitate to grab that book from the shelf hiding beneath many other administrative reports and journals. The book is about the much hyped, the 30% of India which form the horses that apparently drives this country - the Educated, proud, religious, socially, economically and politically conscious people, which is called Middle class. Most of us fall into this category. This book is basically, or I feel the first of its kind, dwells into the lives of this class and tries to visualize the past, present and future of India analyzing the mentality of this singularly powerless, yet the most powerful class of this country.

### Independence and a new India

It starts with the birth of the class, how the British to cut the cost and bring more local involvements in local administrations created the breed which we call 'babus'. The well advanced British education was then a boon to the society that was very much divided on caste and religions. Though this could never be clean and impartial as the British would have thought, they got what they wanted – An elite, British-educated, intelligent individuals to take care of their administration level jobs. The author then moves to the era of Independence struggle, how the empowerment made middle class more conscious of the need for Independence. The idea of an 'organized' Independence movement were born to such minds, as it would be very apparently visible that all the independence leaders were British educated(in India and abroad). The Indian congress consisted of Intellectuals like Nehru, Patel etc the young bloods which fought with their

small group against the British policies in a more diplomatic way. It then mentions how the Gandhian theory of mass movements helped the struggle in getting popular widespread support with the middle class from different corners of the country joining their hands. Needless to mention the invention of nonviolent hartals, lockouts, boycotts etc which the British administration found hard to oppose fearing a widespread condemnation or a further escalation of situations.

### **From Innocence to Insensitiveness**

After independence the Congress leaders with the support of this class comes to the power. Though drained of all the energy they held in their youthful years in pre-independence India they built the machinery, schools, defence, Industries, states, constitutions etc more or less in British structure, which was considered very progressive in those times. Nehru's visions of a democratic socialistic country now finds its hurdles well within in state. How the division of federal powers to state took out much of the control from the hands of Center becomes more and more evident. It quotes many such instances like the failure of land reforms in many parts of the country, how the social fabric became a major hindrance in the path of the people, how educational policies, famines and poor public distribution systems pushed the societies into crisis. The final nail in coffin was the defeat of 1962 war against the China over Aksai Chin, the popular dreams of being a super power shattered that year. The educated population was getting more and more exposed to the happenings around the world and how they moulded their mindset for an 'aim high' strategy in most of the endevors. The book also brushes through the roots to find out why there is a lack of social equanimity in the society. The inevitable parts played by the Hinduism (being the majority religion) is stated in the book very well, the religion which is mostly spread through the stories and epics often fails to justify the reality. For eg. Raama asking for Sita's fire test, Krishna stealing the clothes of gopikas, etc. Moreover the religion instead of unifying the people divided them on castes. Unlike Christian missionary activities Hinduism never preached or created any social upliftment activities until very late. The tendency is mere to pray in temples and give money as 'dakshina'. There ends the social responsibility of a Hindu. There is nothing different in any religion in that matter, nowadays.

### **The flavours we like**

The key information the book tries to tell convey is on how the middle class have become more and more insensitive to happenings in the society. The clause of 'Pride' drives much of the class behaviour as it states tells though how much they believe in liberalization the idea of caste, religion, region, language still hold them back in the dark ages. The typical middle class dream is to get education, then a job, then marriage, then children, then retire. Few of the middle class behaviours explained are the 'Resilient by choice' - how even after seeing and knowing about many issues and problems the public tend to fall resilient to it. Like the take on corruption, how well the public have learned to live within this enterprise; There are many example – Traffic etiquette, public display of mannerism, waste disposal etc are few things which the public have adopted as 'Indian' rather than improving. Another thing is the 'lack of social empathy', as stated above a general insensitiveness towards pressing problems like poverty, child labours, domestic violence etc have drawn a big lines amongst societies. The environmental degradation, injustice etc are the things that burns the country yet the popular verdict is to chose silence. 'Indian Pride' – A general inclination to empathize with those elements that gives pride to the individual is monumental, minor things like Ambani becoming richest Indian in Forbes or a sonofasonofasonofan Indian getting nobel prize, or boasting about the extinct glories of Indian cultures of bygone eras, believing Indian culture to be better than western etc. When the public starts empathising with such things, the conflicts often become egoistic – one fine example would be the IPL. When Army and a group of people fight naturally the morally the public feels like supporting the Army!.

### **Why is middle class always stuck in Middle class?**

The middle class is pseudo class, such a class doesn't exist. It is a feeling of a perpetual deficiency of money

that drives one to give that middle class feeling. Buying a house, a car, kids educations etc are the monumental never ceasing burdens on the shoulders of an individual, hence a person born to middle class planning to go through its age old route would always hesitate when it comes to money. The idea of savings took birth then, this concept found crores of money stashed in the saving account for an unclear future. Now when the kid grows up he or she too would follow the same thing. Further to that the 'pride' thing traps them under the 'manufactured demands' so they buy the decent car, decent clothes, admission in best school and thus finds them trapped under a perpetual race where the money is priority. As a result the prosperity of the society or community or state takes the back seat. Even when the people wants to do good things they cant, of the fear that a change from the norms might become a social catastrophe!

### **Politics and us!**

Now the biggest threat that the democracy of the country is facing is the popular contempt of the middle class towards the politics. Every individual would love to argue how bad their politician is, how corrupt he is etc. The concept of democracy is 'by the people, for the people' - but the middle class believes that it is By the government, to the people. Keeping aside the corruption and other 'politics' the junta fancy in washing off their hands from the public responsibilities completely over to the government and its machinery offering not even a single effort in as much as possible(except the popular claim of Income tax remittance). Complaints about bad sewage systems, municipality not cleaning the roads, traffic departments' responsibility for the mess in the streets, communal problems, social evils etc. At the same time, while sitting in a velvet cushion, closing the eyes and ears to the problems and injustice happening to the compatriots in the country. Until the day the people realise their power and responsibility towards the society, the democracy will remain autocratic and sooner or later it will boomerang back.

The book ends with many positive things that have happened despite the smug from the middle class. The advancement of technologies and the advent of NGOs have open a new avenue. The absence of reformation policies in the society is now fulfilled by the presence of various NGOs and the connectivity through fast growing technology. But again is it still keeping us away, back into the velvet cushion? There is time, we are now living the age of information. And examples to share was a famine in Orissa in 1970s when the population in a couple of villages dwindled following the famine, but the Indians never saw that news. But now though such situations though still arises and people still die we cannot give the excuses of being ill-informed. Sometimes to see such news we have to look beyond the page-3 news papers.

*Start thinking about your country, the calamities are brewing  
The signs of your destruction are written in the skies*

*If you don't understand it now, one day everything will be gone Indians  
In the annals of the history, there wont be even a trace of you story.*

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### **Anyusha Rose says**

An interesting history of the middle classes in India, showing the post-1947 consensus as an unsustainable elite project that needs to be changed if economic growth is to continue in India. Focussing on social justice and the way this is now overlooked by the vast majority of middle class Indians in order to satisfy their own increasingly materialistic needs, the book suggests a number of political reforms to ameliorate the position of the poor. A fascinating insight into the emergence of the Indian middle classes, their evolving relationship

with the rest of society and the legacy of colonialism.

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### **Sarath MK says**

Most of the criticism in the book are valid. But the irony is that solutions suggested to it was not realistic at all. For example is that even though the author made it clear that India accounts a large mass of illiterate rural population, one of the solutions suggested include a e-learning website for the farmers. How can an illiterate community make use of a web portal? Also the author points out the failures in Gandhian ideas of social restructuring after independence, but the book ends with the notion that the rich will eventually will develop a soft corner to the poor.

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### **Neeraj Bali says**

I read this book 12 years ago and came across my notes this morning. I think that this book remains a very important work towards understanding the attitudes, inclinations, compulsions and impulses of our nation's middle class. Here are the notes:

The book argues that the lack of social concern of the Indian middle class is detrimental to the health of the nation and the class' own long term interests. The complete apathy towards the unwashed masses as the nation continues to march down the road to become a mere market or aggregation of demands can cause dangerous social upheavals in the future. Excerpts:

The Relevance of Beginnings

The creation of a native elite in its own image was the most spectacular and enduring achievement of British colonialism in India.

The social segment from which these new beneficiaries came represented largely a continuity: middle class Indians from an educated background.....

.....The members of the nascent Indian middle class in the nineteenth century did not feel a sense of humiliation in collaborating with the agencies of British rule. Indeed...they had acquired a stake in the perpetuation of the British rule.

Yet it (the early Indian National Congress) was essentially an upper- and middle class affair...

(The freedom movement led by Gandhi) involved the masses without empowering them.

Through their participation for the struggle for freedom acquired the profile of a mass movement; but essentially the focus of power and control remained where they always have been - with dominant elites.

It was more than evident that both the Hindu and Muslim communities were inequitable, and each preserved an elite segment that was less than inclined towards a genuine empowerment of the masses and the inevitable socio-economic destabilization that this would involve. The conjuring up of an external threat to the community enabled these vested interests to divert attention away from pressures from the internal

restructuring of their communities.

### The Age of Hope

Freedom came in 1947, but the nature of the entrenchment of the middle and upper classes under British rule, and their leadership of the freedom movement ensured that the institutions built up during the colonial era remained largely intact.

Fortunately for the middle class in India, the freedom movement had generated a powerful ethical and intellectual legacy..... This legacy was symbolized in the compellingly charismatic personalities of Gandhi and Nehru.

These (communal tolerance, belief in parliamentary democracy, romanticization of India's past etc) were the elements that coalesced to form the ideological framework of the Indian middle class at the time of independence.

Such parameters of social interaction were linked with another aspect: a conscious ceiling on material wants.... Material pursuits were subsumed in a larger framework that did not give them the aggressive primacy that they have acquired today.

The hold of the past ensured the continuity of traditional religious practices; the aspiration to be modern resulted in these practices surviving only as a mechanical ritual.....The middle class, caught in the penumbra of the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, was unable to develop an authentic paradigm synthesizing both.

It is clear that almost immediately after independence the direction of the State policy was being dictated by middle class interests. (Perpetuation of English, the education system that favoured the few, etc)

### The End of Innocence

The war with China in 1962 was the first serious blow to the easy confidence and sense of well being of the middle class.... Educated Indians had caught a glimpse of reality behind the comfort of illusions, and suddenly the institutions and beliefs of the past seemed inadequate when confronted with the uncertainties of the future. Expectations appeared more vulnerable now...

The first trend of importance was the visible retreat of ideology from public life and the corresponding transparency of the quest for power as an end in itself.

.... (It) had the potential for the most deleterious consequences in the long run, was the un-ceremonial burial for the need for a society to have a commitment to some kind of ideological binding....

The Indian middle class' propensity to abjectly capitulate before a paramount leader (of which the apogee would be reached during the Emergency declared by Mrs Gandhi) was thus directly related to the erosion of an ideological commitment as an effective countervailing force...

(Another) factor to critically influence middle-class attitude and behaviour was the legitimization of corruption as an accepted and even inevitable part of society.

The trends we have discussed - the retreat from idealism, the reduced sensitivity to the poor, and the

legitimization of corruption - coincided with a change in the character and structure of the middle class itself...the new claimants were...weaned on the pragmatic realism of Indira.

The selective endorsement of some of Mrs Gandhi's actions even at a time when the JP movement had considerable support was not proof of how discriminating middle class was. It was proof, rather of its ideological rudderlessness, where the only compass working was a perception of its own interests and expectations.....The middle class was willing to climb onto the 'moral' platform to the extent that this platform could accommodate its discontents. It was happy, for instance, if its anger against the rise in prices could be given a better projection through a 'moral' critique. But it was unwilling to allow its endorsement of the 'moral' to rein in its own proclivities to the contrary. (Shades of the support for the recent Anna agitation against corruption?!)

The obverse side of this 'authoritarian-anarchic' syndrome is the unqualified adulation of a strong leader at the time of his emergence, and the unconcealed glee at his discomfiture at the time of his downfall. Psychology apart, the essential reason for such wild swings of emotion and allegiance is the absence of an ideological mooring....

Middle class Indians saw Rajiv Gandhi through the prism of their own needs.

The truth is that under the garb of social justice the entire Mandal issue was an intra-middle-class struggle for the perks and perquisites that could be seized from the state.

#### The Inner Landscape

It is a cliche to recall that Hinduism - the religion as it is lived by its countless followers - has no organized church, no one God, no paramount religious text, no codified moral laws and no single manual of prescribed ritual. The predominant emphasis is on personal salvation, a journey in which the individual is essentially alone with his karmas and his God. There is nothing wrong with such an approach in purely spiritual terms.....however, in terms of the individual's relation to the society, this very emphasis on the self as the centerpiece of spiritual endeavour tends to stunt the growth of a sense of involvement in and concern for the community as a whole...A pious Hindu will take a dip in the holy waters of the Ganga totally oblivious to the filth and garbage on and around the bathing ghat...Temples in India will have their coffers overflowing with personal donations from the religiously active, but few of the donors would see much spiritual merit in using the same money for alleviating the misery of the thousands of the visibly poor around them.

A second aspect of Hinduism, of great relevance to our analysis, is the absence in it of a strong and unambiguous single ethical centre. There is nothing in Hinduism which categorically equates any action with sin.....It accepts a moral relativism which refuses to be straitjacketed by simplistic notions of right and wrong.

The absence of a strong moral imperative for social altruism had resulted, under the tutelage of unethical leaders and opportunistic politics, in a horribly bloated unconcern for society itself. The end product was the acceptance of a certain kind of lifestyle: insular, aggressive, selfish, obsessed with material gain, and socially callous.

Did the frenzied absorption in worldly pursuits and the overwhelming preoccupation with material acquisitions reduce the role of religion in the middle-class person's life?.... To some extent it did happen: the frequency of and familiarity with religious ritual was reduced, but paradoxically, the need for the religious identity increased. Breakdown of the extended family.... Induced a hankering for a sense of belonging to

some transcendent institution which could,.... resurrect a sense of community.

The complexes the average middle-class person has about sex and its role in the society are a result of all these factors: a past which is remembered or invoked to justify sexual license; a more recent heritage (British and Mughal) which considers the sexual urge wrong and associates it with guilt; and the present which is invaded, as it were, by the expression of sex as vulgarity or, as depicted in Western soap operas, fantasy.

### The writing on the Wall

The essential point then is that the current wave of liberalization has deepened the tendency which the wealthy Indian already had to ignore the sufferings of the poor.... Once it becomes legitimate to ignore poverty, the sense of community ceases to have a place in social life.....For the truth is that the social insensitivity of the educated and the privileged Indian is writ large on the face of India, whether the professed goal of the country is socialism or capitalism. The new economic policies have accentuated the insensitivity, and brought into sharp focus the psychological polarization between the worlds inhabited by the rich and the poor.

The seminal question for the middle class is: Can such a polarized world be sustained in perpetuity? Or has the time come for this class, in its own interests, to move beyond the 'margins of elite vision'?

If self-interest, a sentiment with which the middle class is not unfamiliar, can jolt it to pause and reassess its strategies for its own benefit in the long run, then several convincing examples can be given to indicate what is the right track.

The answer appears to be a conscious and quantum increase in voluntary activities outside government, particularly in areas of education, poverty eradication and health. The first reaction of many in the middle class will be to dismiss such an idea as idealistic fantasizing. But the proposal is not as unrealistic as it may sound. The elite in the country have always had considerable influence on middle-class aspirations. Within the elite there are quite a few.....that demonstrate a much-required sense of social purpose.....If such examples of social concern by the corporate elite can be expanded manifold and replicated across the country - and the government through appropriate policy incentives should actively encourage the effort - it will send a powerful message of social activism to the millions of upwardly mobile middle-class Indians who are particularly porous to variations of behaviour in the elite segments of the country.....The project here is the arousal of social concern in the long-term interests of both the elite and the middle class.

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### P says

This reads like a boring monologue from your pompous uncle about 'kids nowadays' replete with banal truisms [grumble, grumble]. The author excuses himself in the preface by explaining that he was under a tight deadline from the publisher and enjoyed writing this book in a hurry while he spent time at home, hanging out with his children. Apparently this explains why he only had time to cite quotations of other people's work, including articles he read in the newspaper and quotes from Nehru that he had presumably lying around his study. I'm not sure why he imagined that writing a nonfiction book was unworthy of the sort of dedicated effort and research he puts in to his day-job. Such an important topic as this surely deserves better.

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## **Pradipta Saha says**

I'm no longer proud to be Indian...

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## **Parikshit Nema says**

This is a meticulously researched work on India's middle class, only to conclude that it doesn't exist anymore post 1991 reforms. Much has been written about the demise of ideals and morals among this strata, and how changing political scenarios only hastened it. However it misses out on the role of World Bank and other international agencies in triggering the consumerist wave responsible for the seduction of the middle class. But its spot on in singling out the middle class as the biggest dangers to democracy in India. Varma may sound like a Cassandra to most middle class educated Indians, and most will even refuse to acknowledge his observations, being in an eternal state of denial about its own complicity in India's state of affairs. The issue assumes far more dimensions with the arrival of 'Aam Admi Party', champion of the middle class cause. All along independent India the middle class could carve out a niche for itself at the cost of destitutes below it, without being an electoral entity, adjusting and benefiting from changing political tides and being the cogs in the machinery of the ruling class. That could change, and the situation will get worse if this strata garners any of the political mileage aspires for.

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## **Toshali Gupta says**

Pros:

Brings out internal and external factors which make the middle class what they are today. From history (events and important people and laws) which influenced the scale and status of middle class today to how religion has impacted their growth and sense of community. Interesting arguments and sufficient examples.

Cons:

Writing is far from interesting or captivating. It is mundane and there is a certain monotone associated with it (either in the font/indentation/writing/content in itself)

The examples are not all relevant today and might seem repetitive at times

Lastly, the bias one has of one's own political ideas and intentions

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## **Siddharth Shankaran says**

One of the books that tears apart the mystical halo around the "Indian Freedom" and exposes it in its true contours, shorn of all idealism and pretensions of a nationalistic fervour. Pavan Kumar Varma's language is prose like and the flow of book grips the reader disabusing him/her of blind nationalistic middle class exhortation, in the process. His scathing attack on consumerist middle class ethos and culture appropriating the legacy of revolutionaries in the narrow context of Indian freedom from Britishers, shakes the conventions middle class Indians have grown up with. Book makes a clarion call towards emancipation of large mass of Indian lower class through greater participation of middle class in nation building.

However, in the hindsight ( as I read this book approximately five years ago) , I could see that although the book does clear up an illusion it forms and imposes another, that of Nation. However, to keep my review short, I will skip that criticism. For beginners who are interested in Indian history , this could be an eye opening experience.

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### **Prashanth says**

As Karan Thapar puts it,"An excoriating critique of the middle class" is the perfect description for this book. The author, a diplomat with the IFS, is scathing in his indictment of the middle class(which in any case can only be amorphously defined in India)- for having forsaken completely any pretensions to idealism and ethics especially post liberalization,(unlike in the immediate post independence era when it was inspired by the Gandhi-Nehru ethos), and bemoans the emergence of an uninhibitedly aspirational middle class idiom which accepts the primacy of ends over means. In its single-minded, even obsessive pursuit of personal material prosperity, the author opines, the middle class has become totally insensitive to the deprivations and suffering(indeed, the very existence) of their less fortunate compatriots- and will ultimately have to pay a heavy price unless they see the folly of their ways.

Rather opinionated, in keeping with Mr. Varma's style and somewhat uncharitable at times in assessing the middle class's motivations, this book nevertheless carries quite a few insightful observations on middle class behavior, and is a clarion call to the middle class to display greater social sensitivity- if only in self-interest, to ward off the disastrous social consequences that would otherwise inevitably follow.

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### **Aruna Kumar Gadepalli says**

Reading s non-fiction needs patience as non-fiction tend to describe so much about the topic sometimes making it boring to continue reading. This book is totally different. The subject that is taken is contemporary and apt. From the introduction part the books made me hook to the book. Though I read book on history of freedom mo movement and the role of middle class in general and the books on middle class in particular. The way the subject is treated in this book really interesting and thought provoking as well. Those who are interested in the general books and more so on India, I suggest this book.

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### **Tanvi Chaturvedi says**

good read.. thought provoking and debatable in group! :)

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### **Amritha Kailesh says**

Makes one stay glued to the book.

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