

# LIBERAL STUDIES

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**Meghnad Desai et al., *Making Sense of Modi's India*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2016), ISBN: 978-93-5177-632-1, Pages: 216, Price: Rs 499.00.**

**—Chaarvi Modi**

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When you turn the last leaves and shut the book: *Making Sense of Modi's India*, among all the other perspectives that this book brings out, the most important one is it leaves you reeling in the sentiment of satisfaction and pride that India has finally found a voice of its own in the international community, and a voice that the world just cannot ignore. The book is divided into thirteen chapters, all of which try to break down a general scepticism around key questions like: Where is India headed under Narendra Modi? Was his promise of growth and development a “sales pitch” to seduce gullible voters? Or was it a sincere ambition of substance?

The authors hail from an eclectic mix of professions related to the political sphere- academicians like Meghnad Desai, Faisal Devji, Zoya Hassan, V. Krishna Ananth, Gyanendra Pandey, Shruti Kapila, Radhika Desai; voices from the various forms of media like R. Jagannathan, Andrew Whitehead, Sevanti Ninan, Beena Sarwar, Rashmee Roshan Lall; and former BJP political activist and current head of the Observer Research Foundation- Sudheendra Kulkarni. The chapters are a balanced mix of pro- and anti-Modi rhetoric covering a diverse range of subjects from varying angles: of the right-wing government that the Indian people brought to power through a historic landslide victory in the general elections of 2014 and the dramatic rise of the Hindu nationalist leader whose statesmanship (and frequent international sprees) have been making Indian presence come alive on the global front. Basically, both, his supporters and his critics have put him under their respective microscopes and have attempted to dissect and redissect to comprehend and explain the “Modi phenomenon.”

Whether the authors believe that Modi sincerely aims to build a ‘new’ India or not, they all agree on two common grounds for certain. One, that if the left-wing opposition, aka the Indian National Congress, still hope to give the

ruling government a run for their money in future elections, they need a thorough revival in their approach and need to weed out the decadence that has settled in every sphere of their being. And two, Modi's radical and straightforward approach has resulted in a further strain in India-Pakistan relations.

Now that the popular BJP leader has moved past the demons in his past that once groped his political aspirations and had placed him in a "diplomatic quarantine", he has his government, fellow foreign governments, and his own citizens in a real tizzy. R. Jagannathan in his "Who is Narendra Modi: A 'Communal Czar' or an 'Inclusive Icon'" writes:

Narendra Modi has disappointed many people. He has disappointed his vocal supporters by proving to be less right-wing – economically or culturally – than they thought he was. But he has disappointed his foes even more by refusing to live up to their preferred image of him as the chief minister who presided over a communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002. (p. 80)

However, not all the other authors are so optimistic about his reign of power. Sudheendra Kulkarni, who quit the BJP after 16 years of service on grounds of ideological differences, brings out an important argument about what happens if the Hindu nationalist leader alienates the Muslims; or bends too much towards his staunch Hindu supporters:

...the choices before him would be stark: either he allows himself and his government to be controlled by the Sangh Parivar, or he curbs and subdues the Sangh Parivar in pursuit of its majoritarian agenda. The former choice will spell doom for his government....If Modi makes the latter choice, he would be doing a big service to India. (p. 136)

The role played by the media in the present Prime Minister's meteoric rise has also been brought into picture. Sevanti Ninan in her piece "The Media: Moving to the Right?" wonders if the media, during the 2014 elections covered Modi extensively because it was believed there was "a box-office demand for him" or because "the mainstream media bought into the narrative that the country needed a decisive leader, and it was its job to do its bit to bring about that change?". She agrees that both were probably true. Andrew Whitehead in his "Modi's World: Beyond Selfies and Tweets" brings into perspective the opposite side of the story- proper exploitation of the media carried out by Modi's tech savvy PR team. It is evident that no other Indian politician has made use of social media quite like Narendra Modi has. Beena Sarwar in her "View from

Pakistan: ‘Religious’ Politics and the Democratic Political Process” draws comparisons between India and Pakistan- a neighbour against which India’s foreign policy counts for prolonged electoral success, and from Modi’s strong Hindu nationalist background. Citing similar religious politics that plague the neighbours, she explains:

In India, extremists in the name of Hinduism are trying to push the narrative that to be a true Indian you also have to be a Hindu. They label as traitors those who resist this concept. Similarly in Pakistan, hyper-nationalists term as ‘traitors’ and ‘infidels’ those who question or oppose the ‘two-nation theory’....The bottom line is that criminal acts must be dealt with as such. The rule of law must be applied and due process followed, regardless of the perpetrator’s religion, whether it is religion, nationalism or honour.

*Making Sense of Modi’s India* is a good read for anybody interested in the future of Indian politics. It brings into perspective interesting angles and elaborates an analysis of the Prime Minister’s supposed autocratic rule. It often takes deep plunges into Modi’s haunted past, worries of the possibility of a fascist future for India, Modi’s utter ignorance for Nehruvian principles of development, and even provides an NRI perspective of the NDA government. To put it in short, the chapters covered do justice to the title. It begins by attempting to put the Hindu-nationalist sentiment into historic pre-independence perspective and goes on to debate who is the real Narendra Modi. It examines communal politics, collapse of the left and reasons for their decline and brings in the crucial role played by the media in popularising and depicting Modi’s public persona. It finally rounds up with a view of the Indian political scene from a third party perspective – NRI author Rashmee Roshan Lall thus giving a wholesome picture of the supposed fiasco.

