

Toughest On Lord Haw Haw

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Arvindar Singh



Achhe Din? Ha! Ha!
By Mani Shankar Aiyar
Palimpsest | Pages: 237 | Rs. 250

Mani Shankar Aiyar has been a diplomat, a parliamentarian, a union minister and, above all, an interesting writer and speaker. Aiyar's latest offering, *Achhe Din? Ha! Ha!* is a collection of his recent articles and online columns. As is apparent from the title, it is a pun on Narendra Modi's pre-Lok Sabha poll promise of 'achhe din'. It's quite typical of the author—it provides a good deal of humour as well as interesting facts, apart from being hard-hitting on right-wing parties in general and PM Modi in particular.

Aiyar says in the foreword that he believes Modi is an event manager, not a prime minister. Although this may be a bit too harsh on the strongman from Gujarat, there is substance in the claim that Modi has a tendency to play to the gallery as probably no previous premier. Aiyar, however, does go overboard in his criticism of NaMo and tends to make his views too subjective for the unbiased reader. For example, he takes poor Shashi Tharoor to task for some genuine praise of the PM, and describes Obama as a 'lame duck' president when he visited India just because Modi received him.

But Aiyar's columns contain some interesting bits of political insight as well. He gives a fairly detailed description of the anti-Hindi agitation in the south in the mid-'60s, particularly in Madras state (now Tamil Nadu). He refers to Nehru's assurance of the non-imposition of Hindi in the Lok Sabha on August 7, 1959, and C.N. Annadurai's remarkably forthright assertion in the Rajya Sabha in May 1963: "I speak for English not because I am enamoured of it, but because it is the most convenient tool, it is the medium which distributes advantages or disadvantages evenly." It is pertinent to note that at one time the voice of the opposition counted, without massive disruptions. These are valuable lessons for our political class.

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Aiyar obviously has a soft corner for former prime minister and BJP patriarch Atal Behari Vajpayee. He confesses to touching his feet after being sworn in as a minister. He praises Vajpayee's oratorical skills, his long pauses and the punchline

following them, his allowing the other side to have its say without allowing any disdain. Aiyar, however, hits out at Vajpayee for not taking proper action against Modi and his government in Gujarat during the pogrom of 2002.

Having been the first Indian consul-general in Karachi, Aiyar is passionate and optimistic about Pakistan. He lists three major reasons for his optimism. Firstly, that the Partition generation is dying away on both sides; second, domestic sectarianism and terrorism have overwhelmingly preoccupied the Pakistanis so that hostility to India is taking a backseat; and third, the Islamic extremists for whom hostility to India was a *raison d'être* have been virtually shown the door by the Pakistani electorate in election after election. But Aiyar doesn't touch upon the role of the Pakistani army, which has been sabotaging the peace process because of vested interests. Aiyar's book is eminently readable, if one excuses him the inevitable political slant. I believe he is working on a memoir entitled 'Leaf in the Wind: The Autobiography of a Failed Politician'. Something to look forward to! □
