

Praise for *Memoirs of a Maverick*

‘This book is bursting at the seams with anecdotes. It should be read for that reason alone. Aiyar, in telling these anecdotes, doesn’t spare himself.’ – **TCA Srinivasa Raghavan**, *The Hindu*

‘Anyone who knows Mani as a person, without getting drawn into his vocal political views, will vouch for his irreverence. If that irreverence and ridicule extends to one’s own self – a trait very few authors are capable of exhibiting – you have a very readable book.’ – **Bibek Debroy**, *The Telegraph*

‘A book written by a brilliant mind . . . These are not the memoirs of a maverick but a brilliant ideologue caught in a time capsule.’ – **Bhaswati Mukherjee**, *Deccan Chronicle*

‘If truthfully recorded, memoirs give the measure of an author, his life and work – both the noble and the petty, and even [the] crass. These never paint a pretty picture. It is to Aiyar’s credit that he has tried to be truthful. That makes this memoir a significant contribution to Indian autobiographical literature.’ – **Vivek Katju**, *The Tribune*

‘. . . a riveting narrative of gripping detail . . . the chapter on his four years in Pakistan as Consul-General in Karachi, reveal a love and understanding of a country the rest of us consider an enemy, which will be literally eye-popping for most of you.’ – **Karan Thapar**, *Hindustan Times*

‘Mani’s frankness, honesty and courage, of which I have been a witness all my life, come across in his memoirs.’ – **Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri**, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, *The Wire*

‘The book is highly readable, laced with occasional jibes and often irreverent anecdotes . . . What is striking in the book is that it gives fascinating historical insights into issues and crises experienced by Aiyar that are still active today.’ – **John Elliott**

Praise for *The Rajiv I Knew*

‘From its opening to its concluding page, Aiyar’s narration is about a bond between the author three years and four months older than his subject and who, by the play of an impish fate, was his school-time junior, later his friend, still later his boss and then his hero forever after.’ – **Gopalkrishna Gandhi**, *The Hindu*

‘The Rajiv that Aiyar knew was not the Rajiv that most people knew. Aiyar was privileged to have worked with Rajiv Gandhi intimately and constructively over a long period. Travelling with the prime minister on all his tours, domestic and foreign, gave him a unique insight into RG’s personality and character.’ – **Chinmaya R. Gharekhan**, *Hindustan Times*

‘The value of this work lies in placing his premiership in its historical perspective and, perhaps even more, in placing the man himself on the pedestal that he so richly deserved as harbinger of a modern India, which for reasons described in the book, has never been fully acknowledged in public discourse.’ – **Wajahat Habibullah**, *The New Indian Express*

‘Mani Shankar Aiyar has written with integrity, lucidity and fluency. Rich with independent and widely researched information and replete with anecdotes, this fusion of personal reminiscence and national history is a landmark contribution to literature on the political history of India and South Asia.’ – **Javed Jabbar**, *Frontline*

‘A partisan but spirited and well-documented account of Rajiv Gandhi’s time as the prime minister and subsequently, for a brief period, also as the opposition leader.’ – **Suhas Palshikar**, *The Indian Express*

‘Should be read for bringing back to us an important phase in the passage of modern India with meticulous documentation.’ – **Anand K. Sahay**, *Asian Age*

‘He is one of the better writers and is always rewarding to read for his turn of phrase, as much as for his content.’ – **Aakar Patel**, *The Wire*

A Maverick in Politics

1991–2004

Mani Shankar Aiyar

 juggernaut

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*To Suneet, who else?
For navigating this craft away from the shoals
for over half a century*

AND

my grandchildren

Uma (b.2009)

Kabir (b. 2011)

and

Rukimini (b.2013)

Raghu (b.2015)

and

Ishaan (b. 2013)

Leela (b. 2017)

*In the hope that they will read this story of their grandfather
and keep him in mind as they make their own way through life*



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Introduction

Readers of my previous two books in this series of three volumes might wonder what happened to *A Half-Life in Politics*. That title was changed to *A Maverick in Politics* to stress the link between my earlier *Memoirs of a Maverick: The First Fifty Years (1941–1991)* and my life in the last thirty-three years (1991–2024) that have seen me stumbling through the ups and downs of half a life in politics.

I tell young people who wonder whether they should come into politics that they must first embark on a well-paid professional career to build up some personal capital, for otherwise they will have no alternative to making a commerce of politics. I also tell them that they must first understand and accept that unlike in almost all other professions and vocations, there is no set trajectory in politics that ensures you are better off tomorrow than you were yesterday. No, there is a volatility in the political curve, which you find only in speculative businesses. There is no guarantee that success will breed success or that failure will lead to more failure.

Hope lies in recognizing that the moment you reach the summit is the moment your descent to the valley floor begins, and the moment you hit the valley floor is the moment your ascent to the summit begins anew. Therefore, the one personality trait that politicians need is persistence in the face of setbacks, in the hope and expectation that today's defeat presages tomorrow's victory, even as tomorrow's victory presages the next reversal of fortune. I tell my young friends that only those who can withstand the amplitudes of changing fortunes are fit for the life political. If you want assured and consistent progress, politics is not for you.

At the present time, when I am at my political journey's end, I realize one factor that I had not quite taken account of earlier – there might come

a moment of such total rejection by your own party and political patrons that you are left staring at darkness with no light at the end of any tunnel, 'unwept, unhonoured and unsung'. That is not the fate that overtakes everybody in politics, but only those, like me, who are non-conformists, those who are mavericks, those whose lives are so long as to outlive their usefulness. Writing my memoirs in nearly a thousand printed pages has been my way of reconciling myself to loss and despair. It has been a form of mental and emotional therapy.

What remains are the memories and fantasies of yesteryear. There were high points besides the low. Coping with success was easy, although I needed my wife, to whom this volume is dedicated, to save me from the 'arrogance of power'. Coping with failure was more personal. 'Black ruins of my life rise into view', was one line from Cavafy that reverberated in my mind, and 'No ship exists / To take you from yourself' from the same poem, 'The City', was another. I was also haunted by the concluding lines of John Betjeman's 'Song of the Nightclub Proprietress': 'What on earth was all the fun for I am ill and old and terrified and tight.' I just never thought the Gandhi family that had brought me into politics would bowl me out too.

Do I regret having quit the foreign service midstream to take the plunge into politics? Not for one second. I took my decision consciously, never looking back, knowing that it might end in disaster, not triumph. It turned out that both triumph and disaster were in store for me, and when I suffered a severe setback in 2006, my youngest daughter, Sana, was on hand to comfort me with Rudyard Kipling's lines from his famous poem, 'If':

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two Impostors just the same . . .
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son.

No, I regret nothing.

Mani Shankar Aiyar

On board Air India AI 121, Delhi–Frankfurt

27 June 2024

Acknowledgements

I reiterate my deep gratitude to all those mentioned in the earlier volumes of these memoirs, *Memoirs of a Maverick*, 2023, and its companion volume, *The Rajiv I Knew*, 2023, some of whom have helped enormously with this third and final volume, *A Maverick in Politics*, as well.

I also thank with all my heart Swati Chopra who has done a quick, efficient and sympathetic job of editing this volume, as well as Wesley D'Souza who has so ably handled the copy editing of the book. Samarth Menon has been quietly helping in the background. To him too my thanks.

I cannot but single out Chiki Sarkar, the publisher, but for whom this project would never have taken off and whose guiding hand is evident throughout the final version of this volume. I must also mention again N. Venkatraman, my indefatigable aide for more than three decades, whose contribution to this volume, as to the previous two, is, quite literally, immeasurable.

Mani Shankar Aiyar
Bangkok
30 September 2024



1

A Rookie in Parliament

1991–1996

Finding my feet

I returned to Delhi elated and triumphant to find two sets of invitations to dinner from the two rival contestants for the leadership of the Congress party. I decided to attend both to test the waters. Fortunately, before going to either, I first called on my old boss, Dinesh Singh, and got a lesson in shedding my old diplomatic ways.

Dinesh warned me that if I went to Sharad Pawar's party, it would immediately be reported to P.V. Narasimha Rao. And if I went to PV's dinner, Sharad would immediately be notified. If, therefore, I went to both, I would be treated by both as unreliable. This was politics; the parties were not genteel diplomatic receptions. I, therefore, plumped for PV.

The other lesson I learned from Dinesh that evening was that I was now not in a rules-based civil service but an elected member of a political party. Therefore, I had to hang on to whatever I might have saved from the election campaign as no further assistance would be forthcoming from the party for the next five expensive years. The party contribution was not a TA/DA advance to be accounted for and the surplus reimbursed.

Suitably chastened, I went to PV's dinner and found an overwhelming majority of the Congress MPs there. PV was then sworn in as PM and I attended my first Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) meeting in

the Central Hall as a full-fledged and duly anointed member. By sheer coincidence, PV happened to pass by my aisle seat after the meeting was over. One look at his exhausted, sweat-stained face and I wondered whether he would make it alive to the exit. But a high post is an unbeatable tonic, and it soon became evident that he would survive at least as long as he remained in office.

Tribute to Rajiv Gandhi

We convened for the first substantive session of the Lok Sabha. The proceedings were to begin with tributes to the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi before adjourning to honour his memory. I sought out the Speaker, Shivraj Patil, and intimated to him my hope that I would be called to speak. Although condolence tributes are normally allotted only to party leaders, Speaker Patil made an exception in my case as he was aware of my relationship with Rajiv. Thus, I set what is perhaps a world Parliamentary record – of delivering my maiden speech at my first substantive Parliament session.

I spoke extempore, beginning with: ‘For all the six years that I knew Rajiv Gandhi, he walked in the shadow of death, and I walked in his shadow. Now, death has taken him away and I am left in the shadows.’

Describing him as a man of exceptional courage, brave and compassionate, I went on to affirm that notwithstanding the omnipresent threat to his life, our former prime minister had ‘never allowed the fear of death to stand in the way of taking the decision that he thought was right’. That was my summing up of the actions Rajiv Gandhi had taken to settle the issues of separatism and secession in Punjab, Assam, Mizoram and Darjeeling, apart from sending in the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) to stop Sri Lanka from tearing itself apart.

I then turned to the four basic elements of nation-building that Rajiv Gandhi had believed in: strengthening grassroots democracy by amending the Constitution (Panchayati Raj); socialism founded in ‘compassion for the common man’; technology ‘for the advancement of the humblest and the poorest’; secularism to celebrate the rich diversity of the country

and ensure that 'every part of India, however minor it might be' felt it 'belonged' to 'this larger entity' as 'India could not be India' without such a sense of belonging; and non-alignment, whose 'ultimate purpose' was 'to put an end to the Quest for Dominance'.

'If the world is to survive,' I concluded, 'it is necessary that the whole world imbibe the essential values of the Indian civilization', which Rajiv Gandhi had portrayed as 'the capacity to live with diversity', and more as 'the capacity to celebrate diversity'. I went on: 'If we live up to that vision of India, then it is only the body of Shri Rajiv Gandhi that would have died, the soul of Shri Rajiv Gandhi, which is the soul of India, will continue to live.'

My peroration proclaimed that I had 'the privilege of interacting perhaps more closely with him than any other human being at the intellectual level'. Because of the hours we spent discussing his speeches and writings, I came to see

. . . a human being whose inspiration, particularly his dedication to non-violence, came straight out of the Mahatma's school of thought and whose idiom was that of Jawaharlal Nehru, and whose glory in the spiritual legacy of India came straight out of Swami Vivekananda. That great soul is no more with us; he has gone.¹

CPP hauls Dr Manmohan Singh over the coals

Soon after, Dr Manmohan Singh presented his first budget. It signalled such a radical departure from the country's economic policy since Independence that there was considerable alarm in the ranks of the CPP. Some sixty Congress MPs participated in the most democratic discussion I had hitherto (or subsequently) experienced in party fora.

Only two of the Congress MPs stood up for the reforms that Doctor Sahib had initiated. One was Nathu Ram Mirdha, the veteran Rajasthan MP who was a respected campaigner for farmers' rights. The other was me. While almost all the speakers had opposed the reforms on account of its reversal of the country's past economic logic, I chose to plead my

case in support of the finance minister on quite different grounds, which I imagined would carry the strongest possible political message to the CPP.

Recalling the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting in March after I had been briefed by the chief economic adviser on the desperate state of the economy,² I recounted how I had found Dr Singh ill in bed and had conveyed the message to him that he should kindly call on Rajiv-ji immediately after he recovered. I, therefore, urged my fellow-Congress MPs to not oppose what was in effect a Rajiv Gandhi-approved budget.

R.K. Dhawan immediately objected to my revealing information involving the former PM imparted to me in strict confidence. I shrugged off the objection. I do not know what impression I made on the audience, but Doctor Sahib has ever since pointed with grace and gratitude to Nathuram Mirdha and me for being the only Congress MPs to openly side with his radical proposals.

Even if the CPP was initially sceptical, the welcome given to Dr Singh's reforms, particularly by the business community and the international community, was so overwhelming that the Narasimha Rao period has come to be recognized for and identified with its reforms of the party's earlier socialist policies.

Later, as the reforms process unfolded, I became increasingly disillusioned and remained an unreconstructed socialist as I saw massive corruption, with governmental acquiescence or unconcern, unfolding in its wake. There was also a disturbing imbalance in the benefits that reforms were giving big business houses and the derisory economic benefits reaching the poor. I also greatly regretted that the Congress party was listening more to business interests and their powerful advocates in the media (particularly the 'pink' newspapers and journals), who were thrilled with being sprung from the shackles of the 'licence-permit raj', than to the poor and deprived who had always been the fundamental constituency of the party.

I would be disturbing the flow of this story if I – as a professed maverick – were to list my reservations about the reforms process here, but plenty follows at the right places in the narrative to explain my reservations. For

example, please see my references to the head of the ministry of finance's Directorate of Enforcement Javid Chowdhury's *The Insider's View*³ (2010) in the context of the Harshad Mehta and Ketan Parekh stock market scams and the casual manner in which Enron's investment in the Dabhol power plant project was approved and which almost bankrupted the state of Maharashtra. Enron collapsed because of legal proceedings against the company in the US, not in India. But more – much more – about all this at the appropriate junctures of this narrative.

Orientation course

The newly minted MPs were invited by the Lok Sabha Secretariat to a briefing session by Jaswant Singh, veteran of many a Lok Sabha. It was a little disconcerting when someone called out to me as we were entering the committee room in the Parliament House annexe, '*Seekhne aaye ho, ya sikhaane?*' (Have you come to learn or to teach?) What most disturbed me at the briefing was Jaswant's insistence that MPs had to decide between being 'constituency' MPs and 'national' MPs. I could not see why we could not be both. So, I set myself to being both, prioritizing my work in the constituency without neglecting my work in Parliament as a 'national' MP (and adding to that my duties as a 'Tamil Nadu' MP).

Let us begin with constituency matters.

