

ook, Mr Aiyer

criticism. John Quincy Adams once wrote to his wife: "I well know how hopeless a task it would be to attempt the refutation of the falsehoods which are constantly circulating against me in the newspapers. For every amputated head of the hydra there will always be two new ones to shoot up..." John Tyler wrote: "What means of protection had I against the assaults which were to be made upon my character...?"

The greatest of all presidents, Abraham Lincoln, had his critics raving against him. The authors say that "the (civil) war and Lincoln brought out the worst in (Wilbur F) Storey, although he scarcely needed any stimulation." Storey was editor of the *Chicago Times* but Lincoln made no pretence about trying to suppress *The Times* which was "plainly a danger to public order as well as unquestionably treasonous."

And so on. Different presidents handled the press in different ways but they were mostly silent sufferers, with some good exceptions like Roosevelt and Truman who could both give back as good as they received. The celebrated story of Truman calling a columnist a s-o-b for criticising the singing of his daughter Margaret is well known. Roosevelt would let loose heavy sarcasm. We are told that "sarcasm was as far as he would go; indignant denunciation was not his style, as it had been with so many of his predecessors..." Two men are singled out for praise in the handling of the press. Eisenhower's

Jefferson, great champion of free press, was most unhappy with it. Lincoln made no pretense about trying to suppress *Chicago Times* which was "unquestionably treasonous."

press secretary Jim Hagerty and Kennedy's aide Pierre Salinger.

Mr Aiyer may well learn a great deal from this book. So could the Prime Minister who recently attacked the press for "whining and groaning". ■

Indian flavour

THE SUBMERGED VALLEY AND OTHER STORIES

Manoj Das; Batstone Books

Distributed by Rupa & Co. Rs 25.



WHAT is Manoj Das? A social commentator? A psychiatrist? A sly peeper into peoples' hearts? Or just a plain storyteller? Reading this collection of 17 short stories one better than the other, I get the

distinct feeling that Manoj Das is all these, being an incorrigible Indian besides. No urban writer could have written such stories about rural India and its people.

Manoj Das has been compared, as a short story writer, to Hardy, Saki and O'Henry. The comparison is unfair. Not that Manoj Das does not know how to give his short story the surprising ending. That part of the craft he obviously does not need to learn from anyone. One has only to read the lead story itself or any of the others to realise that here is a master of the art.

The thing that stands out about all the stories is their Indianness, that indefinable quality one first discerned in Mulk Raj Anand and later in R.K. Narayan. Their people are not paper-cut-outs. They are genuine, warm, generous, earthy. Their conversation is not in standard English. That would have been artificial. Indians, even the most educated, can often slip into Indianisms which some writers—say, a Shanta Rama Rao, or even an Anita Desai—would not dare to touch. What Manoj Das does is to give a literal translation of what his characters said in their mother tongue.

Some may accuse him of using an ancient trick to ensnare the innocent

reader into thinking that here is an authentic, 22-carat gold Indian writer. So what? Style has its uses and I would not quarrel with an Indian writer, writing in his own native tongue, but using the earthy patois of his region. If that is excusable, why shouldn't a writer write in Indian English?

What is most relevant is that the characters are so true to life. I would swear that I have met many of them, not exactly in the same situation. There is Kunja, tossing "a pinch of smile" at the havildar. Raja Sahib who shot down a number of inedible birds, drove at great speed, caused accidents and reached the police station at greater speed to report the matter, and Babu Virkishore, hon'ble minister of fisheries and fine arts, who found his cap stolen. *Mystery of the Missing Cap* might slightly extend our credulity, but it is a hilarious bit of story and just the kind that one would hear on a village *chavadi*.

Manoj Das has a sure eye for the comic situation and he captures it with the clear accuracy of a camera. There is no discernible malice in the author, which is as it should be.

Life goes on. Fools and knaves and charlatans crowd the stage and vanish into the darkness. But in such moments as it is lighted, how captivating are the actors and how uncompromisingly committed the *sutradhar*! One can only say bravo to Manoj Das and to ask him to give us more of the same. ■

Oh, Calcutta

THE CITY OF JOY

Dominique Lapierre

Arrow Books, Rs 50.



I have been to Calcutta half a dozen times in recent years and always returned with a deep sense of melancholy; Calcutta seemed dead or dying. And yet its charm captivated me. Once, the digni-

tary in the municipal corporation in charge of the press insisted on showing me round the slums to show, I suppose,