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## **A Discerning Tribute**

*(complete text)*

### **Review of Heehs: *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo***

*by Marcel Kvassay*



#### **The Lives of Sri Aurobindo**

**Peter Heehs**

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It is almost a year since the publication of Peter Heehs's latest book [The Lives of Sri Aurobindo](#) by the Columbia University Press in the United States. In the meantime, a lot has been said and written about it; it has even sparked a controversy among the admirers and followers of Sri Aurobindo. In this essay I will steer clear of the controversy as far as possible, examining the book in the wider context of Heehs's other writings, most of which are aimed primarily at academic audiences. In so doing, I will build on my [earlier review \(Kvassay 2005\) of \*Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond\*](#), an anthology of Sri Aurobindo's writings edited by Heehs. Fully available online, it details my past association with Heehs and provides extracts that document lesser-known aspects of Sri Aurobindo's thought. I will also quote at length from the [online edition of \*The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo \(CWSA\)\*](#).

The preface to the *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* gives a lively account of Heehs's early acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo. It started in 1968 in one of New York's yoga centres, the instructor of which offered "instructions in postures and breathing for a fee, dietary and moral advice gratis." Among the photographs of "realized beings" covering the centre's walls, one was "of Aurobindo as an old man." Heehs remembers not being particularly impressed "as the subject wore neither loincloth nor turban, and had no simulated halo around his head." A few months later, "after a brief return to college and a stopover in a wild uptown 'ashram'," Heehs encountered another photograph, "the

standard portrait of Aurobindo.” “I was struck by the peaceful expanse of his brow, his trouble-free face, and fathomless eyes,” Heehs recalls. “It would be years before I learned that all of these features owed their distinctiveness to the retoucher’s art.” His deepening interest, fed by reading, eventually brought him to India and to “the ashram Aurobindo had founded.” “I might not have stayed,” he confesses, “if I had not been asked to do two things I found very interesting: first, to collect material dealing with his life; second, to organize his manuscripts and prepare them for publication.” This was his entry into the science of history:

*Most of the documents I found in public archives dealt with Aurobindo’s life as a politician. They confirmed that he had been an important figure in the Struggle for Freedom, but fell short of proving what his followers believed: that he was the major cause of its success. Nevertheless, his contribution was significant and, at the time, not very well known. Accounts that had been written to correct this deficiency were so uncritical that they undermined their own inflated claims.*

*...The most remarkable discovery [among Sri Aurobindo’s manuscripts] was a diary he had kept for more than nine years, in which he noted the day-to-day events of his inner and outer life. Most biographies of Aurobindo have made his sadhana, or practice of yoga, seem like a series of miracles. His diary made it clear that he had to work hard to achieve the states of consciousness that are the basis of his yoga and philosophy....*

*The genre of hagiography, in the original sense of the term, is very much alive in India. Any saint with a following is the subject of one or more books that tell the inspiring story of his or her birth, growth, mission, and passage to the eternal. Biographies of literary and political figures do not differ much from this model. People take the received version of their heroes’ lives very seriously. A statement about a politician or poet that rubs people the wrong way will be turned into a political or legal issue, or possibly cause a riot. The problem is not whether the disputed statement is true, but whether anyone has the right to question an account that flatters a group identity.*

*Aurobindo has been better served by his biographers than most of his contemporaries have. But when I began to write articles about his life, I found that there were limits to what his admirers wanted to hear. Anything that cast doubt on something that he said was taboo, even if his statement was based on incomplete knowledge of the facts. Almost as bad was anything that challenged an established interpretation, even one that clearly was inadequate. (p. xii)*

Heehs’s articles began appearing in late 1970-s in *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, a journal of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. [\*India’s Freedom Struggle 1857–1947\*](#), a winner of an Indian State Prize in 1987 and Heehs’s first book, was published by Oxford University Press India in 1988. Since then he has written four other books and more than forty articles, and edited three anthologies. While producing this remarkable output he remained focussed on a few primary themes. One was Sri Aurobindo’s role in the Indian Independence movement. In the opening essay of [\*Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism\*](#) (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) Heehs sums up:

*The image of Mahatma Gandhi and the overall success of his methods have led many to believe that India achieved freedom without resort to violence. In fact violent resistance was preached and practised from the beginning of the national movement till its end and had a significant effect on its course and outcome.*

*Roughly speaking, there were four factors behind the success of the movement: ‘legitimate’ pressure exerted by public bodies, non-violent passive resistance, violent resistance, and global political and economic changes. Most historical accounts highlight the first and second factors, give an inadequate account of the third and all but ignore the fourth. (p. 1)*

Heehs devotes a number of articles and a full monograph, [\*The Bomb in Bengal\*](#) (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), to violent resistance and its consequences. He tries to show that the

revolutionary movement was much more complex than most people assume. He highlights the difference between what Aurobindo intended (a large-scale military uprising against the British) and what actually happened (isolated acts of small-scale terrorism primarily targeting British officials). Second, he examines the apparent links between the militant nationalism of the early revolutionaries and subsequent communal discord.

Aurobindo was firmly convinced that oppressed nations were entitled to use violence to attain freedom. As he wrote in *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* in 1907:

*It is the common habit of established Governments and especially those which are themselves oppressors, to brand all violent methods in subject peoples and communities as criminal and wicked. When you have disarmed your slaves and legalised the infliction of bonds, stripes and death on any one of them, man, woman or child, who may dare to speak or to act against you, it is natural and convenient to try and lay a moral as well as a legal ban on any attempt to answer violence by violence, the knout by the revolver, the prison by riot or agrarian rising, the gallows by the dynamite bomb. But no nation yet has listened to the cant of the oppressor when itself put to the test, and the general conscience of humanity approves the refusal.*

With regard to India, he would have preferred an armed uprising, or guerilla warfare, but when the movement started veering towards terrorism, he did not actively intervene to stop it. What then was his attitude towards terrorism, and how did it evolve over time? Moreover, Aurobindo and other radical politicians of his time are, in Heehs's words, "sometimes accused by liberal and left-wing historians of preparing the way for communalism by giving a Hindu slant to the movement." Is there any link between the leaders "most often mentioned as proponents of religious nationalism" — such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipinchandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghose, Mohandas Gandhi — and the ideology of the modern Hindu right wing? Without credible answers to these questions it is impossible to fix Sri Aurobindo's place in Indian political history. In going through *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, I shall therefore refer to Heehs's other writings to clarify some of the issues which he did not elaborate in the biography.

The opening passage is a good example of Heehs's narrative style:

*Rangpur means "city of delight," but the town of Rangpur, in Bengal, was so unhealthy in the nineteenth century that people called it Yampur, or "city of death." The summer of 1872 was particularly bad. The annual outbreak of malaria was followed by a cholera epidemic. No one in the town knew more about the situation than its energetic civil surgeon, Dr. Krishna Dhun Ghose. As the father of two small children and the husband of a pregnant wife, he had personal as well as professional reasons for concern.*

*Swarnalotta Ghose was due to give birth in August. As her time approached, her husband decided to send her to the comparatively healthy environment of Calcutta. When she reached the metropolis, she went to stay in the home of Mano Mohan Ghose, a friend of her husband's who lived in the best part of town. Fourteen South Circular Road was situated just off Chowringhee Avenue, which faced the town's maidan, or park. The neighborhood, distinguished by its elegant mansions, had given Calcutta the name the City of Palaces. The opulence did not go very deep: The windows in the front of Mano Mohan's house looked out on similar mansions, but the windows in the back looked down on a pond where the local people fished, bathed, washed, and drew their drinking water.*

*Just before dawn on the morning of August 15, 1872, in this house that straddled two worlds, the nineteen-year-old mother gave birth to her third son. When the time came to name him, her husband, "in a sudden inspiration," chose Aurobindo, a Sanskrit word for lotus. At some point the doctor added an English-style middle name in honor of his friend Annette Akroyd. Annette came to Calcutta from England in December 1872. By that time Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose and his mother had left the city. (p. 3)*

As if by a few strokes on an impressionist canvass, we are transported to Calcutta on that day: we feel the morning air, the breeze from the trees, see the people near the pond, hear the doctor naming his son. And we are alone there, the narrator seems to have disappeared. We are permitted to keep our modern outlook, and so notice the contrast of the two worlds, or the superficiality of the opulence. What the author does not give us is the foreknowledge of the turns and twists of the story. We see the actors as they might conceivably have seen themselves, or be seen by those around them, at that point in time. The feeling that the narrator has disappeared is, of course, an illusion: he is very much present, actively and effectively arguing his case — the case of the *meaning* of the facts. Prior to that, also invisibly, he has selected the facts he intends to present. Narrative history — the technique Heehs employs in his full-length books, as opposed to the more argumentative style he uses in his essays — is a powerful tool but requires careful handling. Historians are not allowed to cover up holes in their factual base with odd bits of rhetoric. Moreover, even as we are caught up in the brisk pace of events we are already exposed, perhaps without noticing, to the narrator’s interpretation. Apparently simple and straightforward passages often hide a surprising amount of painstaking research and interpretation. To give one example, Heehs simply announces the address of the house in which Aurobindo was born. He spares us the trouble, unless we venture into the detailed notes at the end of the book, of analysing all the evidence which indicates that this house, rather than another one, is Aurobindo’s birthplace. The method Heehs uses in *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* seems to be similar to the one he employed in *The Bomb in Bengal*. There, in the preface, he states:

*My approach in this book is nationalist in focus, narrative in form and chronological in presentation. I offer no apologies for any of these choices. Although somewhat out of fashion in academic circles, the nationalist approach has revealed much, and has more to reveal, about how men and women responded to the challenges of colonial rule. Narrative history, never abandoned by popular writers, has recently found defenders among historiographers and philosophers. And the very school that condemned chronological history as incurably ‘eventish’ (événementielle) not long ago announced ‘the return of the event.’ Perhaps it never went away.*

*In choosing to concentrate on men and events I in no way deny the importance of social, economic or political structures. I have placed my data in this larger framework in a series of papers that are listed in the bibliography. But in this book my primary aim has been to arrange the factual data in the form of a narrative accessible, interesting and perhaps even inspiring to the non-academic reader. I have avoided the weakness of commemorative histories by basing myself entirely on primary sources. I have made use not only of the familiar government records but also hitherto untapped collections of judicial and police documents. I have also sought out and read the papers and published accounts of participants and eyewitnesses. (pp. ix–x)*

I could not help but wonder why a similar passage was not present in the preface to *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. Perhaps it is a part of the difference between biography and history. As for “hitherto untapped collections” and “accounts of participants and eyewitnesses,” Heehs, of course, uses them in the biography too. Even more — as a member of the Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research Library, he has been instrumental in making such records available to the public. This is, I believe, an example of the probity and openness to critical inquiry that is a characteristic of all competent scholarship. The eyewitness accounts, such as Dinendra Kumar Roy’s [With Aurobindo in Baroda \(Roy 2006\)](#), are gradually being published or re-published by the Archives department of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. And a significant portion of the “collections of judicial and police documents,” first printed in *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, is now available online as [Documents in the Life of Sri Aurobindo](#) on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram website. It is imperative that the full collection be made available so that discussions of Sri Aurobindo’s place in Indian history can draw on verified primary sources.

Skipping over the well known facts relating to Sri Aurobindo’s youth in England, I re-enter the narrative shortly after his return to India in 1893:

*It did not take [Aurobindo] long to find out that few people in India shared his passion for radical political change. The public life of the country, such as it was, was dominated by opportunistic members of the emerging middle class. These men knew as little about the life of the masses as did the Britons they imitated in speech, manners, and dress. Innocent of the realities of British political life, they spoke of the British parliament in terms that would have made an English schoolboy smile. "The British House of Commons," proclaimed Surendranath Banerjea, was "the palladium of English Liberty, the sanctuary of the free and brave," upon whose "liberty-loving instincts" the Indian people could rely. Aurobindo had followed English politics for almost a decade, watching the Tories, then the Liberals, make a mess of the Irish problem, and he knew that what Banerjea said was bunk. (p. 38)*

The opportunity to "share his insights with others" came in Summer 1893: "It is more than time ... to tell the Press and the public that this is a grave and injurious delusion," refuted Aurobindo all such naïve hopes. "The English are not ... a people panting to do justice to all whom they have to govern ... but of all nations they are the most sentimental: hence it is that they like to think themselves, and to be thought by others, a just people and a moral people." His first published piece, *India and the British Parliament*, merits an extended quote. Besides its immediate appeal, it will help us trace the development of his style. The quote is from *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (Vol.6-7: Bande Mataram, pp. 8-10)*:

*It is true that in the dull comedy which we call English politics, Truth and Justice — written in large letters — cover the whole of the poster, but in the actual enactment of the play these characters have very little indeed to do. It was certainly not by appealing to the English sense of justice that the Irish people have come within reach of obtaining some measure of redress for their grievances. Mr. Parnell was enabled to force Mr. Gladstone's hand solely because he had built up a strong party with a purely Irish policy: but we unfortunately have neither a Parnell nor a party with a purely Indian policy....*

*Moreover the lessons of experience do not differ from the lessons of common sense. After years of constant effort and agitation a bill was brought forward in Parliament professing to remodel the Legislative Councils. This bill was nothing short of an insult to the people of India. We had asked for wheaten bread, and we got in its place a loaf made of plaster-of-Paris and when Mr. Schwann proposed that the genuine article should be supplied, Mr. Gladstone assured him on his honour as a politician that the Executive authority would do its best to make plaster-of-Paris taste exactly like wheat. With this assurance Mr. Schwann and the Indian people were quite satisfied. Happy Indian people! And yet now that the loaf has actually reached their hands, they seem a little inclined to quarrel with the gift: they have even complained that the proportion of plaster in its composition is extravagantly large. Nevertheless we still go on appealing to the English sense of justice.*

*The simple truth of the matter is that we shall not get from the British Parliament anything better than nominal redress, or at the most a petty and tinkering legislation.... If we are indeed to renovate our country, we must no longer hold out supplicating hands to the English Parliament, like an infant crying to its nurse for a toy, but must recognise the hard truth that every nation must beat out its own path to salvation with pain and difficulty, and not rely on the tutelage of another.*

The article was followed by nine essays targeting the institution that, says Heehs, "in theory embodied the political life of the country: the Indian National Congress." He comments: "The content and tone of Aurobindo's articles would not have been out of place in a London newspaper, but in the timid little world of Indian journalism, they stood out a bit too much." The owner of the journal was warned that "the articles could land him in jail." In response Aurobindo toned them down, but soon abandoned the series. It would take another twelve years before his fiery political journalism would get a second chance, and create a broad and lasting impact on a public that had been shaken from its torpor by the partition of Bengal in 1905.

Aurobindo spent thirteen years, from 1893 to 1906, in Baroda. Here he worked in the state service, "learned Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages" and "assimilated the spirit of Indian

civilisation and its forms past and present” to complement the “entirely occidental education” he had received in England. Here is a glimpse of that era as captured in the biography:

*Aurobindo had to wait until the beginning of 1894 to become acquainted with his family in Bengal....*

*[He] was surrounded on his arrival by a horde of female relatives, most of whom he never had met. He stood abashed until rescued by [his grandfather] Rajnarain, who gave him a bear hug and led him to safety. Aurobindo was, his sister Sarojini concluded, a “very shy person.”...*

*For all intents and purposes Aurobindo was an orphan. It would not have been surprising if he had gradually lost contact with his family, but instead, he developed warm relations with his grandfather, his sister Sarojini, and his younger brother Barin, as well as aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, and other relatives for which English has no name....*

*Back in Gujarat, Aurobindo made an effort to learn the language of his family. Following his usual practice, he started with literary masterpieces: the poetry of Madhusudan Dutt and the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bankim, the greatest Bengali writer of the age, died that April at the age of fifty-five. This impelled Aurobindo to write a series of essays on his life and writings, which were published in *Indu Prakash* in July and August. Aurobindo began with an account of the writer’s education. Bankim’s “intellectual habits were irregular,” he noted approvingly. “His spirit needed larger bounds than a school routine could give it, and refused, as every free mind does, to cripple itself and lose its natural suppleness.”...*

*Aurobindo’s efforts to learn Bengali were not matched by an equal enthusiasm to master Marathi and Gujarati, the languages, respectively, of Baroda’s ruling family and of the majority of its people. On the day he reported for duty in the state in 1893, he had been asked to learn Gujarati within six months. This was not much to ask of a scholar who already knew Sanskrit, but he would not play along. Ignoring frequent reminders from his superiors and even the threat of a cut in his pay, he refused to learn a language that did not interest him. Eventually he picked up enough Gujarati to read and summarize documents, enough Marathi to chat with friends, and enough Hindi to read books and newspapers. By the turn of the century he knew at least twelve languages: English, French, and Bengali to speak, read, and write; Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit to read and write; Gujarati, Marathi, and Hindi to speak and read; and Italian, German, and Spanish to read. (pp. 40–43)*

Throughout the biography, Heehs lets his restrained sense of humour meld in with Sri Aurobindo’s, creating a powerful and vivid narrative.

Of particular interest is Heehs’s handling of the spiritual side of Sri Aurobindo’s life, and of the related difficulties. Heehs had already faced them in his earlier [Brief Biography](#) (Heehs 1989), where he had explained:

*My main problem has been to balance the conflicting claims of two different classes of readers: students of history and the social sciences, and spiritual aspirants. Readers in the first class require a work of scholarship: well researched, documented, and objective, making no unwarranted assumptions or unverifiable claims. A biographer who addresses this audience is expected to provide facts and interpretation based on facts. Readers in the second class are looking principally for spiritual guidance and uplift. They want anecdotes and examples, not facts and interpretation. They are apt to consider documentation unnecessary and to be offended by an objective tone. A biographer who wishes to reach them must share their assumptions and make appropriate claims....*

*A scholarly biography cannot be devotional in tone. But a biography of Sri Aurobindo that ignored his spiritual life could hardly be considered complete. For forty-five of his seventy-eight years he was engaged in the practice of yoga. The correct attitude of the scholar towards the inner experiences of this period is neither the passivity of the believer nor the aggressiveness of the debunker, but rather*

*the critical openness of the seeker of truth. It is legitimate for a scholar to assume, as I have assumed, that spiritual experiences are (or, let us say, can be) genuine experiences of actual realities. I recognize that not all my readers will wish to make this assumption. I have accordingly divided the book into two parts, the first of which requires no acceptance of, nor interest in, spiritual matters... (pp. vii–viii)*

In the second part of the short biography, Heehs relied on a “more flexible approach necessitated by [the] assumption of the possible validity of Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual experiences.” He had to address several issues. Biography tends towards an outward view “because the documents upon which it must be based record external events. The emotions, the mind, and the spirit, essential to a full definition of personality, are more elusive.” As a person opens to the spiritual life, the importance of these “elusive” factors increases. Yet they often operate invisibly, leaving behind them no record, no outward happening. To use Sri Aurobindo’s own words, his life “has not been on the surface for men to see.” “Fortunately,” says Heehs, “Sri Aurobindo provided his own solution to the problem. ...he wrote about it himself. In autobiographical notes, in talks, in letters, and in a recently published diary, he provided a significant amount of information about his spiritual growth.”

The second issue was that

*the very existence of the spirit has never been objectively established, and it is not generally admitted by the mind of the present century. If one accepts it as a postulate in order to inquire into its possible workings, two further difficulties emerge: the lack of hard data, and the lack of clear interpretive guidelines. Sri Aurobindo’s accounts of his spiritual experiences are the only information on his inner development that we have or ever shall have. But these accounts are authentic, plentiful, and of diverse origin. Together they may constitute the richest documentation of the spiritual development of an advanced yogin that has ever been made available.*

*It is one thing to scrutinize descriptions of spiritual experiences, quite another to interpret them. Unlike such disciplines as history and literary criticism, the study of spirituality has no generally accepted hermeneutic framework. Spiritual experiences are not available on demand, nor do they lend themselves well to intellectual systematizing. We shall therefore not attempt a critical interpretation of Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual life, but hope that our work of collation and commentary will serve a useful purpose. (Brief Biography, pp. 86–7)*

The same detached, descriptive approach to spirituality relying on textual scholarship permeates *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* too. Apart from its drawing on a greatly expanded supply of detail, there is only one notable (but methodologically minor) difference. Trying to capture more of the complexity of Sri Aurobindo’s personality, Heehs switched to a holistic presentation: all the aspects and incidents, including the spiritual ones, are now dealt with in strict chronological order, without the intrusion of prospective or retrospective views.

Classical studies in England exposed Aurobindo to the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Parallel preparation for Indian Civil Service introduced him to the culture of ancient India. On his own, he acquainted himself with European literature and history. Absorbing and comparing these diverse cultural strands, he became convinced of the essential superiority of ancient India to modern Europe. There was something precious that India possessed as a potentiality and was destined to give to the world, but first she had to realise this potentiality in herself, and for that she had to be free. In this way Aurobindo’s early cultural nationalism gave birth to his political nationalism. At this point, it had not taken on any sort of religious colouring. While in England, Aurobindo knew too little about the Indian religious tradition. Heehs traces how, over the years, his preoccupation with classical Sanskrit facilitated his turn towards spirituality:

*From around 1900 to 1902, [Aurobindo’s] main interest was Sanskrit epic literature.... Western scholars, arguing from Homer, were trying to reduce Vyasa’s masterpiece [Mahabharata] to an Iliad-*

*like epic less than a tenth of its actual length, along the way informing educated Indians that their national poem was “a mass of old wives’ stories without a spark of poetry or imagination.” Such views offended his critical sense and his sense of national pride. As alive to Homer’s greatness as any English or German scholar, he still considered Vyasa a poet whose vigor had no equal in world literature. Moreover, the Mahabharata held the key to classical India, a culture with values that ought to be affirmed:*

*“There are signs that if Hinduism is to last and we are not to plunge into the vortex of scientific atheism and the breakdown of moral ideals which is engulfing Europe, it must survive as the religion for which Vedanta, Sankhya & Yoga combined to lay the foundations, which Srikrishna announced & which Vyasa formulated.”*

*This passage is one of the first signs that Aurobindo had developed an interest in the religion of his ancestors... [which] was for him embodied in the Bhagavad Gita. He began a translation of the Gita at this time, in which he brought out its emphasis on selfless service: “Not by refraining from works shall a man taste actionlessness and not by mere renouncing of the world shall he reach perfection.... Do thou works that the law demands of thee, for action is mightier than inaction.” (pp. 56–7)*

I have chosen to cover in detail the lesser-known facts of the early years, especially of the period 1904–8. I believe that the answers to most questions concerning Sri Aurobindo’s place in Indian political history as well as his development as a philosopher lie in this crucial period. I intend to show how his spiritual development unexpectedly mingled with his political career, and present a brief account of his first major spiritual experience and its consequences. Quoting and paraphrasing from Heehs’s text, I will first follow the “spiritual” thread, then tackle the political and revolutionary aspects.

Around 1904, after an interlude filled by Kalidasa’s classical poetry, Aurobindo’s interest shifted to the Upanishads:

*He read the texts along with the commentaries of Gaudapada and Shankaracharya, with the aid of Paul Deussen’s System of the Vedanta and other European works. The Western scholars annoyed him, and even Shankaracharya seemed to him to miss the point. Aurobindo had no interest in “what philosophic Hinduism took [the Upanishads] to mean”; what he wanted to discover was “what the Upanishads” — the texts, not the commentaries — “really do mean” in themselves. In the end, he came to believe that their deeper meaning could only be grasped by one who had undergone an “elaborate training” in yoga. He recently had learned a bit about yoga from [his friend] Deshpande, who had been practicing for a year or two. But his friend made it seem as if yoga required one to renounce action. However interested Aurobindo may have been, he “refused to take it up, because it seemed to him a retreat from life.” (p. 71)*

In 1905, after translating eight short Upanishads, he started his first commentary on the “briefest and pithiest of them all,” the Isha Upanishad:

*One verse lays great stress on action: “Do your deeds in this world and wish to live a hundred years.” Commentators of the school that sees the world as illusion, maya, glossed over the obvious meaning.... In a dialogic commentary, Aurobindo has a Guru tell a Student that the true purpose of renunciation is to gain divine power to “pour it in a stream over the world.” True sannyasis were “the most mighty in God to do the work of God.”*

*The language of Aurobindo’s dialogue is heavy and pedantic, the characters shallow and unconvincing, but the work shows evidence of much original thought. Aurobindo had begun his study of the Upanishads with the widely held idea that they “declare the phenomenal world to be unreal.” His reading convinced him that this was not their original intent. Maya, he insisted, did not mean “illusion” but “the principle of phenomenal existence,” that is, the power by which the phenomenal*

*world is created. Only such a conception could account for "both the truth of sheer transcendent Absoluteness of the Brahman and the palpable, imperative existence of the phenomenal Universe." Having written this, he added, in a prescient footnote: "Of course I am not prepared, in these limits, to develop the final argument; that would imply a detailed examination of all metaphysical systems, which would be in itself the labour of a lifetime." (p. 79)*

Convinced now that spirituality did not require abandoning life and action, he began to practise yoga with the aim to "have the direct vision of God." In a letter to his wife dated 30 August 1905 he writes: "If God exists, there must be some way to experience His existence, to meet Him face to face. However arduous this path is, I have made up my mind to follow it." The same year Bengal was partitioned, and he could openly join politics.

His public political career lasted only four years, from 1906 to 1910, but he had taken part in secret revolutionary preparations from around 1902. The initial results were discouraging. In 1904, the secret groups still lacked organisation and were besieged by internal conflicts. This, combined with the "apathy and despair" that were pervading the country, forced him to conclude "that secret action or preparation by itself was not likely to be effective" without "a wide public movement which would ... popularise the idea of independence as the ideal and aim of Indian politics." The Partition of Bengal provided the opportunity. For a time, the whole country was in an uproar, loyalist Moderates no less than radical nationalists. But soon the radicals stood apart as the "New Party" within the Indian National Congress. In order to break the Moderates' information monopoly, the New Party established its own newspapers. Aurobindo reached national prominence through his articles in *Bande Mataram* — an English-language organ of the "Extremists," as the radicals were called by their opponents. A trial for sedition in August 1907 made him a celebrity.

In 1906 and 1907, the Extremists had been on the rise. In the latter part of 1907 the Moderates, supported by the British, decided to reverse the trend by reorganising the Indian National Congress at its upcoming annual session. The changes would cement their own position "so that they would hold the majority for years to come." At this point, says Heehs, "Aurobindo and others favored seceding and forming their own organization." B.G. Tilak, the recognised leader of the Extremists, "preferred to work within the Congress, but he suggested that the Extremists hold conferences before and after the session. Aurobindo went along with this."

Tilak's reasons were tactical. The Indian National Congress, for all its timidity, enjoyed a unique rapport with the public, and the British, however contemptuous of it in private, would hesitate to use force against the Extremists so long as they operated within the Congress. Aurobindo differed, but did not want to break with Tilak. In "The Life of Nationalism," a *Bande Mataram* article dated 16 November, 1907 he argued that the repression was bound to come and that it would, ultimately, assist the victory of the Nationalist idea.

Heehs covers at length the tumultuous Surat session at which the Extremists were expelled from the Congress. He weaves in the impressions of Henry Nevins, a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* at the session, and details his interview with Aurobindo. "Himself a graduate of Oxford and interested in radical causes — he had covered the 1905–1906 revolution in Russia and was a personal friend of Kropotkin's — Nevins found much to admire in Aurobindo's politics," says Heehs:

*"[Aurobindo's] purpose, as he explained it to me, was the Irish policy of Sinn Fein — a universal Swadeshi, not limited to goods but including every phase of life. His Nationalists would let the Government go its own way and take no notice of it at all." The Extremists "proposed to work on the three lines of a national education, independent of Government but including the methods of European science; a national industry, with boycott of all foreign goods except the few things India could not produce; and the encouragement of private arbitration, in place of the law-courts, for the settlement of disputes." But behind these simple means a deeper spirit was at work. As Nevins related, "Aurobindo Ghose had already, I think, formed the project of developing out of the Congress,*

*or in place of the Congress, a nationalist and democratic body that would prepare the country for self-government.” Nevinson found in Aurobindo’s words “a religious tone, a spiritual elevation,” very different from “the shrewd political judgment of Poona Extremists [led by Tilak].”... (p. 137)*

Aurobindo’s *sadhana*, spiritual practice, was suffering “amid the helter-skelter life he had been leading” during his political days, and he “had been wanting to consult with a yogi for some time.” The opportunity came after Surat. His younger brother Barin arranged a meeting with a little-known Maharashtrian yogi named Vishnu Bhaskar Lele who, some time back, had given Barin a “first glimpse of spiritual awakening”:

*The yogi was a man in his late thirties, a year or two older than Aurobindo. He worked as a government clerk and looked it: stocky frame, nondescript face, thick nose, rustic dress, unrefined speech. But Aurobindo saw in his eyes both childlike devotion and latent power, and he had no qualms about putting himself in his hands. He told Lele that he had taken up yoga three years earlier, beginning with pranayama. For a while he had obtained some interesting results: great energy, visual phenomena, fluency in writing poetry. Then he got involved in politics. His pranayama became irregular and he fell ill. Since then he had been “doing nothing and did not know what to do or where to turn.” He wanted to resume his practice but was unwilling to give up his work. Rather, he hoped that yoga would give him the strength to do it better. Lele replied, unexpectedly, that yoga would be easy for Aurobindo, as he was a poet. There was no need to give up his work, but it would be better if he could take a few days off...*

*Lele asked Aurobindo to meditate. “Do not think,” he said, “look only at your mind; you will see thoughts coming into it; before they can enter throw these away from your mind till your mind is capable of complete silence.” Aurobindo had never heard of such an idea, but he followed his teacher’s instructions. “In a moment” his mind became quiet “as a windless air on a high mountain summit.” Then, to his astonishment, he saw that what Lele said was true: His thoughts were not arising from within but “coming in a concrete way from outside.” As the intruders approached, “before they could enter and take hold of the brain,” he pushed them back — not by a “forcible rejection,” but by a sort of conscious detachment. In three days, “really in one,” his mind “became full of an eternal silence.”*

*Lele wanted Aurobindo to silence his mind so that he could establish a relationship with a personal godhead and learn to follow its guidance. He told his student that a voice would arise in the silence. None did. Nothing at all came out of that “absolute stillness,” which had blotted out “all mental, emotional and other inner activities.” Outwardly, the “movements of the ordinary life” continued, but they “were carried on by some habitual activity of Prakriti [nature] alone which was not felt as belonging to oneself.” There was no sense of individuality. All that remained was an ineffable something, a formless reality or brahman or “That,” but “what realised that Reality” was not an individual but “a nameless consciousness which was not other than That.” (pp. 142–3)*

”Grave difficulties attend any attempt to describe this state,” admits Heehs. “Up to this point, it has been possible to satisfy the insistence of critical readers for objective verification. But when one writes about subjective experiences, this sort of verification is not possible.” He reiterates his principle of making “use of Aurobindo’s accounts of his experiences, trying to square them when possible with other sorts of evidence, but not treating them as data for psychological or sociological analysis”:

*It was, in a word, nirvana, in the Vedantic rather than the Buddhist sense: a “blowing out” or extinction of world and personality. Perception remained, but it was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of the unreality of the things perceived. The world was seen as a vast maya or illusion. It was precisely the experience that Aurobindo did not want from yoga. He had always rejected mayavada, the school of Vedanta that holds that the world is an illusion. Now he found himself plunged in the experience that mayavada is based on, and it was so strong he could not have*

*gotten out of it even if he had tried.*

*Lele too had hoped for something different for his student. The inner divinity whose voice he wanted Aurobindo to hear is poles apart from the impersonal Absolute that his student had become absorbed in. But Lele knew better than to try to interfere. He prayed for Aurobindo to emerge from the experience or else to pass on to something beyond it. In the meantime, he watched as Aurobindo let the experience “have its full play and produce its full experimental consequences.” (p. 144)*

Aurobindo was able to continue his routine activities, though he now perceived them as purely mechanical. They “proceeded on the surface,” without disturbing the inner silence. In this state he even gave a few public speeches, but then,

*On January 19, before going to give [another] speech, he found that “there was no activity on the surface” — his mind was a perfect blank. He asked Lele, “How am I going to speak? Not a single thought is coming to me.” Lele told him to pray. Aurobindo said he did not feel like praying (he had never been the praying sort). Lele said it did not matter; he and others would do the praying. Aurobindo should go, “make namaskara to the audience and wait and speech would come to him from some other source than the mind.” Aurobindo agreed and went to the hall. Friends found him withdrawn, apparently “dazed.” When they spoke, “he took refuge in silence.” Someone handed him a copy of *Bande Mataram*. His eyes fell on two headlines: the ‘yugantar trial,’ judgment delivered and another newspaper prosecution, the ‘nabasakti’ office sacked. These remained in his mind as he went to face the audience. As instructed, he made namaskara, called for inspiration, and waited. Just as Lele said, words came out of the silence: crisp phrases quite different from his usual discursive style:*

*“You call yourself Nationalists. What is Nationalism? Nationalism is not a mere political programme; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God; Nationalism is a creed in which you shall have to live....” (p. 146)*

Heehs reminds us that this speech — one of Aurobindo’s “most quoted political utterances” — is often cited by people who do not seem to have grasped its real purport:

*Admirers cite it as an expression of enlightened politics based on the ancient greatness of Hinduism. Detractors regard it as a dangerous mixture of religion and nationalism. Both are reading into it things that are not there. Apart from a few literary references, Aurobindo did not allude to Hinduism. The “religion” he referred to was the “religion of Nationalism,” the sacrifice of all one is and has to the nation “in a religious spirit,” that is, with faith, unselfishness, and courage. The “Nationalism” he referred to was the program of the Nationalist (Extremist) party. He specifically excluded nationalism in its normal political sense. The speech, to be sure, is shot through with religion, but not religion as the term is ordinarily understood. Aurobindo was stating his own credo of dedication and self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Nothing else he ever said or wrote goes farther in explaining the fearlessness, if not the rashness, with which he pursued his political aims. (pp. 147–8)*

I will not go into details of Heehs’s argument here – interested readers can refer to a [companion review \(Kvassay 2009\) of \*Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism\*](#), in which Heehs examines the alleged link between religious nationalism and later communal discord in India.

Lele accompanied Aurobindo to Bombay and remained with him till January 24. As the time of the departure for Calcutta approached,

*[Aurobindo] went to Lele to ask for guidance. Lele began to give him detailed instructions — to meditate at a fixed time, and so forth — then stopped and asked him if “he could surrender himself entirely to the Inner Guide within him and move as it moved him.” Aurobindo told Lele he could. Lele replied that in that case, he had no further need of instruction. This ability to hear and be guided by an inner voice was one of three things that Aurobindo got from Lele. The others were the ability to silence the mind and open to the brahman experience and the ability to speak, and later to write, by*

opening to an inner inspiration. He always was grateful to Lele for showing him the way to developing these inner abilities. But he did not need his guidance any longer. The two would meet again in Calcutta, but not as guru and disciple....

Aurobindo reached Calcutta on February 3, almost a month after the date he had given to his wife before his departure. He found an agitated letter from her.... His [reply] shows better than any retrospective account the effects of his January experiences:

"I was to have come on January 8, but could not. This did not happen of my own accord. I had to go where God took me. This time I did not go for my own work; it was for His work that I went. The state of my mind has undergone a change. But of this I shall not speak in this letter. Come here, and I shall tell you what is to be told. But there is something that has to be said at once. From now on I am no longer the master of my own will. Like a puppet I must go wherever God takes me; like a puppet I do whatever he makes me do.... From now on you will have to understand that all I do does not depend upon my will, but is done at the command of God. When you come here, you will understand the meaning of my words...." (pp. 148–50)

Aurobindo's use of the word "God" after his *nirvana* experience is peculiar. He certainly did not mean it in the traditional theistic sense. Later he started using the neutral term "the Divine," which better conveyed the idea of the ultimate Reality, in which personal and impersonal, static and dynamic aspects fuse into unity. Similarly, his use of the word "religion" corresponds more to our contemporary notion of "spirituality" — the inner experiential core of religion without its outer crust of creed, dogma and ritual.

After return to Calcutta, Aurobindo continued writing for *Bande Mataram*. He later recalled that everything he wrote "got itself done without any thought entering [his] mind or the silence being in the least disturbed or diminished." "But there was no noticeable diminution in the force or relevance of his output," records Heehs. One of Aurobindo's colleagues even felt a new "this-worldly colour" in his articles.

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On May 2, 1908 Aurobindo was arrested — as a suspected "mastermind" — along with the members of a secret revolutionary group led by his brother Barin. Sometimes called "militant nationalists" or "violent revolutionaries," they might better, Heehs explains in *The Bomb in Bengal*, be referred to as terrorists — so long as it is understood that the term is used in its technical — not journalistic — sense: "the use of small-scale violence, generally in the form of assassination and robbery, by small, urban groups to achieve political ends." This would distinguish terrorists from guerillas who attempt to establish "pockets of liberated country" in rural areas. He is using this pragmatic definition though he is aware that "experts on terrorism have never been able to agree on what it is.... Political assassination, once regarded as the hallmark of terrorism, is now seldom spoken of as a terrorist act unless many innocent people are killed along with the assassinated figure...." He also admits that, quite often, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," but he stresses that "the justifiability of violent revolt does not depend merely on the perspective of the participants, but also on the suitability of the means in a given context. Were other methods available that might have given equally effective or even more effective results without causing bloodshed? Were civilians needlessly endangered? Were innocent people targeted just to get CNN to send a camera crew?"

In this respect the early Indian "terrorists," in general, steer clear: members of the Barin's group, for instance, "never deliberately targeted civilians," writes Heehs. The two victims of their last, "botched assassination attempt" that led to the arrest of the whole group, were indeed civilians, "but

the target was a member of the colonial judiciary.” Here is how Heehs recapitulates the birth of the movement in the biography:

*As the nineteenth century moved towards its close, the British Empire seemed secure throughout the world. The news that the Boers had resisted British encroachment in the Transvaal was greeted by many, Aurobindo among them, with amazement and delight. In a poem “written during the progress of the Boer War,” that is, between 1899 and 1902, he congratulated the poorly armed Dutch farmers for defying “the huge colossus who bestrides the earth.” Passing in silence over the Boers’ own racism, he concluded that destiny had chosen them because they were ready to die for what they believed in. India too could defy imperial Britain if the men of the country could develop the same fighting spirit. But for this to happen, a radical change was needed in the Indian mentality. Pondering over how to bring this about, Aurobindo conceived a three-part program. First, there would be “a secret revolutionary propaganda and organisation of which the central object was the preparation of an armed insurrection.” Along with this would come “public propaganda intended to convert the whole nation to the ideal of independence which was regarded ... by the vast majority of Indians as unpractical and impossible, an almost insane chimera.” Finally, there would be an “organisation of the people to carry on a public and united opposition and undermining of the foreign rule through an increasing non-co-operation and passive resistance.” A bold plan — but how was it to be executed? The organization needed an organizer. Well endowed with the skills of the strategist and propagandist, Aurobindo lacked the push and promotional flair that are needed for grassroots work. Happily, a man with just these abilities, and political ideas that matched Aurobindo’s, turned up in Baroda in 1899. (pp. 61–2)*

The man was Jatindranath Banerji, a Bengali dreaming to become a soldier but “ineligible to join the Indian army.” Through Aurobindo’s friends he got admitted to the Baroda army. In 1901 or 1902 — after two or three years of training — he was sent to Calcutta to “set up an *akhara*, or gymnasium, and look around for men he could train.” “No one expected quick results,” writes Heehs — “Aurobindo thought the program ‘might occupy a period of 30 years before fruition could become possible.’ Jatin, younger and more impulsive, had a shorter time frame in mind.”

Aurobindo gave Jatin a letter of introduction to Sarala Devi, a granddaughter of Devendranath Tagore, who was “encouraging young men [of Calcutta] to learn the use of the *lathi*, or bamboo staff.” Through her he came in contact with Pramathanath Mitra, a Calcutta High Court barrister and head of the Anushilan Samiti, ostensibly a physical culture club with secret revolutionary leanings. Anushilan Samiti was started (and actually run) by Satish Chandra Bose at the inspiration of Sister Nivedita, an Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda. Nivedita seems to have been a “believer in the gospel of physical force,” writes Heehs, and her contacts included the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin as well as the nationalistic Japanese writer Okakura Kakuzo. At Mitra’s suggestion, Jatin and Satish joined forces in March 1902, founding a new, expanded Anushilan Samiti.

In the beginning of 1903, Aurobindo sent Barin to Calcutta to help Jatin. The “thin, dreamy, bespectacled youth” that Barin was would not have impressed anyone as a soldier, but he showed “an infectious enthusiasm for the cause.” With Barin and Abinash Bhattacharya “spreading the word” (Abinash himself being Barin’s first recruit), and “Jatin breaking in the recruits, the society slowly began to take shape.” Aurobindo visited Calcutta towards the end of February 1903. He met Pramathanath Mitra and “the two agreed on the overall line of approach: establish *samitis* throughout the province, provide training in physical culture, and, when the time was right, introduce revolutionary ideas.” But soon problems arose:

*One of the society’s early conflicts was over an ideological question: the role of physical violence in its activities. To Sarala Devi, the purpose of martial arts training was to develop physical strength and manly attitudes. To Jatin, Barin, and Aurobindo, it was a step toward establishing militias for guerrilla warfare. Sarala Devi broke with the society over this issue. More serious ruptures were caused by pettier problems. Jatin and Barin did not get along personally. Jatin was a natural leader, a good drill*

master, and (according to his critics) a martinet. Barin was easygoing, undisciplined, and unwilling to take orders from anyone but Aurobindo. When Barin and Jatin disagreed, Barin wrote a letter to his brother. Aurobindo wrote back telling him to work things out himself. The next time Aurobindo came to Calcutta, he rebuked Barin for picking a quarrel and brought about a truce. It proved to be short lived. "The breach was healed," Barin noted, "only to gape wider as soon as his back was turned." (pp. 74–5)

Aurobindo's next trip to Bengal in the second half of 1904 was "to settle the wrangling between Barin and Jatin, which had [again] split the *samiti*." Aurobindo "ignored the accusations and tried to get to the bottom of the conflict." His success was ephemeral: while visiting his family in Deoghar (accompanied by Barin), "letters arrived with fresh complaints against Jatin. Fed up, Aurobindo told Barin: 'I can see that nothing will ever come of Bengal.'" After this split, which "marked the end of the Bengal secret society," both Barin and Jatin left Calcutta. "The groups in Calcutta that survived acted alone and without vigor," sums up Heehs.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 unexpectedly energized the national movement. Aurobindo first took an extended leave and visited Bengal, but later quit his post in Baroda and moved to Calcutta permanently. Back in Calcutta, in an atmosphere of "high exaltations and self-forgetfulness" of the anti-partition movement, Aurobindo and Barin started a Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* in order "to popularise the idea of violent revolt." When Aurobindo joined politics and started writing for *Bande Mataram* in the middle of 1906, "the reins of the revolutionary movement [in Bengal] passed from him to his brother Barin." Barin contacted Hemchandra Das, a former associate, "and others who were eager for revolutionary action." Practically at the same time, the secret groups began sliding towards terrorism. Heehs examines the reasons in his *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*:

*[Barin] first tried to carry out the original idea by giving paramilitary training to the recruits. But the boys (and most of them were boys) had no interest in martial discipline or long-term planning. Why bother to learn drill and lathi-play when you could blow up a train or a magistrate with a well-made bomb?*

*The lure of quick and impressive results was the principal reason why the Bengal secret societies turned from military preparations to the terrorist methods that became their hallmark. The terrorists believed that this change of strategy was imposed on them by irresistible forces. In *Wounded Humanity*, an apologetic book published in 1936, Barin explained:*

*"Swadeshi movement had intervened and police excesses on innocent processionists in Barisal [East Bengal] and Bowbazaar [Calcutta] streets exasperated some of our leaders ... [who] made our immediately taking recourse to bombs as retaliatory measure a condition for supplying us with funds for work...." (pp. 4–5)*

Though Heehs finds some of Barin's explanations in *Wounded Humanity* "rather hard to swallow," there certainly was "a popular desire for a dramatic reply to police brutality and official arrogance" which, in turn, must have influenced both the recruits and the donors. But the terrorists were not all that reluctant as Barin tried to make them look. They even developed a theory of driving the British out of India by a persistent campaign of assassinations: who would accept a governmental post if it carried with it a certainty of being assassinated sooner or later? This idea of a violent revolutionary "short-cut" to Indian freedom was naïve at best: it grossly overestimated the military potential of the terrorists and underestimated that of the British Empire.

Aurobindo was not in favour of assassinations — he did not think they could change anything — but he seems to have endorsed armed robberies as a legitimate means for the secret groups to get at arms and money. Barin occasionally consulted him but "the amount of detail that Barin reported and the exact nature of the advice that Aurobindo gave in return" remains unclear, says Heehs. Here is one consultation that he was able to reconstruct:

On April 5, [1908,] Barin asked Aurobindo what he thought of his plan to assassinate Léon Tardival, the mayor of the French enclave of Chandernagore. "Why do you want to do this?" Aurobindo asked. "He broke up a swadeshi meeting and oppressed the local people," Barin replied. "So he ought to be killed? How many people will you kill in that way? I cannot give my consent. Nothing will come of it." Barin disagreed: "If this isn't done, these oppressors will never learn the lesson we have to teach them." Seeing that his brother had made up his mind, Aurobindo concluded: "Very well. If that's what you think, go ahead and do it." Barin then went down and told the men who were waiting: "Sejda [elder brother] agrees."

Five days later, Barin, Indubhusan Roy, and Narendranath Goswami went to Chandernagore. One of them was carrying a bomb disguised as a carriage lantern. On the evening of April 11, Barin passed the bomb to Indubhusan, who threw it through a grating into the room where the mayor was dining with his wife. The detonator exploded, but not the charge. For the fifth time, an attempt to assassinate a government official with a bomb had failed.

Aurobindo knew that Barin was acting recklessly and occasionally asked him to be more careful, but he never stood in his brother's way. Great sacrifices were necessary if India was to be free. Many would die, but death was nothing to fear. In a piece published in *Bande Mataram* on April 11 — coincidentally the day of the Chandernagore bombing — he wrote: "Self-abandonment is the demand made upon us" by the motherland. "She asks of us, 'How many will live for me? How many will die for me?' and awaits our answer." (pp. 153–4)

Years later, asked why he had not actively opposed the assassinations, Aurobindo replied: "It is not wise to check things when they have taken a strong shape, for something good may come out of them." As Heehs points out in *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*:

*The pace of constitutional reform picked up briskly after the first terrorist incidents. Three months after the arrest of Barin and his friends, [Secretary of State] Morley insisted that the reforms then under discussion 'be extended immensely.' The government never admitted that its concessions were made in response to terrorism, but it certainly became more willing to negotiate once the terrorists had shown the dangers of obduracy. The Extremists were aware of this and incorporated it into their strategy. 'Even diplomacy must have some compelling force behind it to attain its ends,' wrote *Bande Mataram*, and 'peaceful means can succeed only when these imply the ugly alternative of more troublesome and fearful methods, recourse to which the failure of peaceful attempts must inevitably lead to.' The government's next reform package, the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, was announced after another terrorist outbreak. (p. 6)*

Heehs notes that even Gandhi claimed to "admire and adore" the patriotism of "the party of violence." Though he never compromised his ideals by cooperating with it, he knew that "much of his strength came from being perceived by the British as a lesser evil." The party of violence was, said Gandhi in 1930,

*'as patriotic as the best among us,' commendable especially because it had 'much sacrifice to its credit.' But while admiring the objective of these 'young men and even women who want to see their country free at any cost,' he had 'no faith whatsoever in their method.' Knowing that they wanted action and not talk, he invited them to channel their energy into the civil disobedience movement, which alone could bring 'complete independence' (now the official Congress goal) and at the same time 'save the country from impending lawlessness and secret crime.' Many terrorists answered his call. Those who did not added to the momentum of the movement, while making Gandhi's non-violent methods seem less belligerent than they were. (pp. 8–9)*

In *The Bomb in Bengal* Heehs records that "Aurobindo supported armed insurrection" till around 1910. By then, "British repression had all but crushed the movement," and Aurobindo decided that "the existing forms of protest, violent as well as non-violent, were ineffective":

*'God has struck it all down,' [Aurobindo] wrote to a colleague in 1911, 'Moderatism, the bastard child of English Liberalism; Nationalism, the mixed progeny of Europe and Asia; Terrorism, the abortive offspring of Bakunin and Mazzini. The latter still lives but it is being slowly ground to pieces. At present it is our only enemy, for I do not regard the British coercion as an enemy, but as a helper. If it can only rid us of this wild pamphleteering, these theatrical assassinations, these frenzied appeals to national hatred with their watchword of Feringhi ko maro, these childish conspiracies, these idiotic schemes for facing a modern army with half a dozen guns and some hundred lathis ... then I say, "More power to its elbow."'*

*At this point Aurobindo thought that a 'really strong spiritual movement' was what was needed, and he spent the rest of his life trying to establish one. But he did not believe that spiritual ideals could be imposed dogmatically in the field of practical politics. This is what Gandhi tried to do with his ideal of absolute non-violence. Aurobindo thought him politically naïve. 'Peace is part of the highest ideal,' he wrote during the late 1940s, 'but it must be spiritual or at the very least psychological in its basis; without a change in human nature it cannot come with any finality. If it is attempted on any other basis (moral principle or gospel of Ahimsa or any other), it will fail and even may leave things worse than before.' (p. xx-xxi)*

In 1920, Sri Aurobindo summed up his political career in these words: "I entered into political action and continued it from 1903 to 1910 with one aim and one alone, to get into the mind of the people a settled will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve it...." Henry Nevinson's impressions of 1907 confirm it: "Like a horse in blinkers, he ran straight, regardless of everything.... Nationalism to him was far more than a political object or a means of material improvement.... Grave with intensity, careless of fate or opinion ... he was of the stuff that dreamers are made of, but dreamers who will act their dream, indifferent to the means." "Among the politicians of the day," writes Heehs in the biography,

*Aurobindo was regarded as a model of disinterestedness, and nothing in the biographical record belies this perception.... His unwillingness to compromise was his strength as well as his weakness. He was — as he wrote in a letter of 1920 — the right person to call on "when there is something drastic to be done, a radical or revolutionary line to be taken." In the give-and-take of day-to-day politics he was less effective. He approved of but could not follow Tilak's advice that a politician should be ready to accept half a loaf, and then demand the rest. Contemporaries and historians questioned his right to be called an effective politician. Certainly he was not a great builder or steady worker. But his radical interventions opened up paths that others could hardly imagine. (p. 130)*

Aurobindo's public political life ended abruptly in 1910 by his departure from Calcutta to Chandernagore and finally to Pondicherry. Casual observers often interpret it as a turning away from politics and an immersion in "abstract spirituality." Heehs, in the preceding quote from *The Bomb in Bengal*, hints that such interpretations are flawed. In order to understand Sri Aurobindo, we need to see his political life and spiritual *sadhana* as complementaries, not opposites.

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Accounts of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual life often begin with his withdrawal from politics in 1910. Most include a summary of what preceded, but the detail provided is seldom sufficient. Properly speaking, Sri Aurobindo's *sadhana* began with his *nirvana* experience in January 1908. It is to the credit of *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* that it gives the years 1908–9 their due. Drawing from a rich variety of sources, Heehs re-creates for us in unsurpassed detail the fascinating story of Aurobindo's arrest in May 1908, of the days of inner turmoil that followed, and of the crisis that eventually led to his second major realisation — that of the active *brahman* "as all beings and all that is."

During the first days in jail, writes Heehs, “there was nothing to do, no one to talk to, nothing to write with, nothing to read.” Aurobindo tried to meditate,

*but he soon discovered that it was one thing to meditate at home in self-imposed solitude and another to do so in solitary confinement. He could manage for an hour or so, but when he tried to continue, his mind was pulled in a thousand different directions, or else became inert. For several days he suffered “intense mental agony.” Soon his thoughts became so wild and unregulated that he wondered whether he was going insane. In desperation he called on the divine for help. In a moment his mind was flooded with coolness, his heart with happiness. From this point on, he found jail life bearable. . . . Looking back later, he realized that even when he believed himself close to insanity, a part of his consciousness remained detached, observing the mind without being caught up in its movements. From this, he learned to take his stand in the “witness consciousness” even when his outer mind was in torment. He also learned, perhaps for the first time in his life, about the efficacy of prayer. He realized that yoga was as much a matter of faith as of unaided human effort. (The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, pp. 163-4)*

The arrest took Aurobindo by surprise. Trying to fathom its deeper meaning, he “remembered that a few weeks before his arrest, he had received an inner prompting to draw back temporarily from politics” but had ignored it then:

*In the solitude and silence of Alipore Jail, he again heard his guide: “The bonds you had not strength to break, I have broken for you, because it is not my will nor was it ever my intention that that should continue. I have another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work.”*

*Aurobindo’s training then began. Ten days into his imprisonment, he was allowed to write home for clothing and, more important, for books. He asked for the Gita and the Upanishads, books he knew well but rediscovered at Alipore:*

*“I was able not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Srikrishna demanded of Arjuna [in the Gita] and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work, to be free from repulsion and desire, to do work for Him without the demand for fruit, to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands, to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure, yet not to do His work negligently.” (Ibid. p. 164)*

On May 18, 1908 Aurobindo and “more than two dozen others” were summoned from their cells for the first day of the preliminary hearing of “Emperor vs. Arabindo Ghose and Others,” otherwise known as the “Alipore Bomb Trial.” From the start, remarks Heehs, “the Indian and foreign press had given much excited coverage to the trial”:

*The Times (London) published a number of reports, one of them outlining the “brilliant career” of the principal culprit. Back home, Indian papers printed column after column on the so-called Great Calcutta Sensation. People were shocked by the violence and deaths, but proud of the daring and initiative of Barin’s group. Their deeds were “a glorious vindication of Bengalee character,” wrote the editor of the Indian World. They showed “not only a striking amount of boldness and determination, but also a certain degree of heroism which constitutes the real essence of patriotism.” Meanwhile the British community was crying for blood: “What would a thousand executions of such miscreants weigh against one good and virtuous life?” asked the Eastern Bengal and Assam Era. The paper Asian suggested that lynching was the right way to deal with the prisoners. The government should initiate house-to-house searches, suppress every “seditious native rag of a newspaper,” and deport the leaders without trial. (Ibid. pp. 169–70)*

In the courtroom Aurobindo “took scant interest” in the hearing. “He concentrated on his inner life when he could, but he sometimes found it hard to avoid being distracted by the flood of sights and

sounds.” Ultimately, he was able to “draw back from the commotion in the courtroom, becoming absorbed in his inner experience.” Alone in his cell, Aurobindo passed his days

*in meditation and other yogic practices. Speaking later about this stage of his sadhana or practice of yoga, he gave few details: “What happened to me during this period I am not impelled to say, but only this that day after day, He showed me His wonders.” It was a tumultuous time in his inner life. For ten days, “brilliant visions and fine experiences,” then “there suddenly came a blow from above and the whole thing was smashed. Again there was a period of similar bright visions, followed by another smashing blow.” At length he learned “that all that presents itself in brilliant colours is not the highest Truth.” Throughout these experiences, his critical mind remained alert, and as a result, “he took them all with reservations.” This was especially important during the brief but intense moments when he was overcome by visions of suffering or invaded by thoughts of hatred. He also had “vivid” and “gigantic” visions that he recognized later as foreshadowings of World War I. The disquieting thoughts and images continued until his mind stopped reacting to them. Critical detachment also was needed when he had visions of the opposite sort, scenes of unearthly beauty that seemed to belong to an inner paradise. (Ibid. pp. 173–4)*

The preliminary hearing took months to complete. The trial started on October 19, 1908 and lasted half a year. As a rule, reports Heehs, Aurobindo “sat alone, sometimes listening to the speeches but more often absorbed in meditation. Some concluded that he was morose if not depressed. By his own retrospective account, he was enjoying the bliss of cosmic consciousness.”

If Aurobindo’s first major realisation — the experience of the “silent, spaceless and timeless Brahman” — carried with it “the sense of the unreality of the world,” his second realisation — that of the active *brahman* — brought with it “the awareness that the Divine was present in all things.” Gradually, “the vision of God in all became his normal state.” As Aurobindo’s meditations in jail continued,

*he found that the realizations of the passive and the active brahman, with the perception of the universe corresponding to each, could alternate, then coexist, then fuse. The uniting of the two in “the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects,” would be, when attained, his third major realization. But for the fusion to take place, his governing power of consciousness had to be something higher than the ordinary mind. Faced with this problem, he heard a voice within that he took to be that of Swami Vivekananda. The voice said “certain things about the processes of the higher truth consciousness,” in particular the workings of the level of consciousness that Aurobindo later called the intuitive mind. . . .*

*Aurobindo heard “all sorts of voices” while meditating in jail, but he was careful not to follow them all. An inner discrimination helped him distinguish helpful from unhelpful or even deceptive influences. The voice of Vivekananda seemed to him worth heeding because it offered verifiable knowledge. . . . So he went forward, cautiously, and discovered that the voice had not misled him. Years later he wondered whether its source was actually the spirit of Vivekananda. It might, he thought, have been “a part of my own mind separating and taking [another] form.” In any case, what the voice told him proved to be very valuable. (Ibid. pp. 177–8)*

Wishing now to focus more on spiritual aspects, I will not delve deeper into Heehs’s masterly recounting of the proceedings of the Alipore Bomb Trial, culminating in the “astonishing” acquittal of him and sixteen others, while his brother Barin and Ullaskar Dutt were sentenced to death, and nine others to transportation for life. The high court later set aside the death sentences of Barin and Ullaskar Dutt, awarding them life transportation instead, and reduced the terms of imprisonment of the others.

Had *Bande Mataram* survived until May 1909 when Aurobindo was released, “it is likely that he would have begun to write for it again.” “The years 1908 and 1909 had been a disaster for the Extremists,” Heehs explains. The “most important victim” of the new, repressive legislation was

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, sentenced to six years for sedition. A “summary deportation” of nine Bengali leaders followed in December 1908. “The cumulative effect of the new measures was to destroy the Extremist party. Leaders who had not been deported or imprisoned — Bipinchandra Pal, Lajpat Rai, G.S. Khaparde — exiled themselves to the comparative safety of England.” “Surveying the ruins,” Aurobindo “could see that the movement had to be kept from lapsing, and he could find no one but himself to do it.” At the end of May 1909 he gave a speech in Uttarpara, his first public appearance since his acquittal:

*As he sat before the six hundred people who filled the library’s courtyard, “there came into my mind [as he later told his audience] a word that I have to speak to you, a word that I have to speak to the whole of the Indian Nation.” This “word” was something he spoke “under an impulse and compulsion”: the story of his arrest and trial, his experience of the presence of the Divine, and his adesh or command to tell the people of India that “it is for the world and not for themselves that they arise.”*

*. . . In the course of his speech he referred often to Hinduism, which he identified with the sanatana dharma, the eternal law of being. But he concluded with a question:*

*“What is the Hindu religion? What is this religion that we call Sanatana, eternal? It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it, because in this peninsula it grew up in the seclusion of the sea and the Himalayas. . . . But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country, it does not belong peculiarly and for ever to a bounded part of the world.”*

*What was eternal was the inner core of Hinduism, not its outward forms and practices. “A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can only live for a limited time and a limited purpose,” but the eternal religion would live forever because it was based on the realization that God “is in all men and all things.” A year and a half earlier, he reminded his audience, he had said “nationalism is not politics but a religion.” Now he put the same thing in a different way: “The Sanatan Dharma” — no limited creed but the eternal religion itself — “that is nationalism.” This was the message he had been given to speak, and having said it, he sat down. (Ibid. pp. 186–7)*

The Uttarpara Speech “had been printed and cited innumerable times,” remarks Heehs, “mostly because it was the first and last occasion that Aurobindo spoke of his spiritual experiences in public.” As such, it is of interest to scholars of mysticism, but at the same time it is discussed by “historians, political scientists, and politicians”:

*Left-wing critics hold it up as proof that Aurobindo’s nationalism was Hindu at its core, and suggest that this bias encouraged the growth of communalism, which made the partition of the country inevitable. Right-wing enthusiasts regard the speech as an inspired expression of the imperishable Indian spirit, citing passages of the speech out of context to make it seem as if Aurobindo endorsed their programs. These readings are both partial and thus both false; Aurobindo’s “universal religion” was not limited to any particular creed. It had been given classic expression in the Upanishads and Gita, but it was also at the core of such scriptures as the Bible and the Koran. More important, “its real, most authoritative scripture is in the heart [of every individual] in which the Eternal has His dwelling.” The true sanatana dharma was not a matter of belief but of spiritual experience and inner communion with the Divine.*

*Such experience and communion was now the main motive of Aurobindo’s life, but he did not believe that it ruled out an active life in the world. Calls to attend meetings poured in, and he accepted many of them. At the same time, he put the finishing touches on the first issue of his new [weekly] newspaper [Karmayogin]. Then he departed for Barisal, East Bengal, where he had been invited to attend a conference. (Ibid. p. 187)*

It is not possible to deal here adequately with the national movement's failure to engage the Muslims, or with the relationship between religious nationalism and communalism. A brief overview based on Heehs's *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism* is presented in a [companion article \(Kvassay 2009\)](#).

During the East Bengal trip, Aurobindo noted down his inner experiences in a pocket diary — the first of a series of diaries, later published as *Record of Yoga (RY)*, that provide us with invaluable direct insight into his spiritual life:

*[The first diary] begins on June 17, 1909 while [Aurobindo] was on his way to Khulna. The next morning, traveling by steamer to Barisal, he experienced an explosion of visual and auditory images and physical and kinesthetic sensations. A blue after-image of the sun yielded to a "pattern of bloodred curves on yellowish background," followed by a "Violet sword" and "Bloodred sword." There was also a voice rising from the chitta (basic consciousness) into the brain. His body experienced various forms of physical ananda or delight, which made all outward touches pleasurable. He had the sense of being "held & moved, the hold always there, not always noticed." In the midst of all of this he had the "realisation of Vasudeva," and passed into various forms of trance, "brief but very deep in spite of loud noise [the steamboat's engine] at ear." . . . That afternoon he heard the voice of Sri Krishna: "I come to slay." In the evening, he reached Barisal and was taken to a Kali temple. There he experienced the presence of the goddess.*

*Throughout his stay in Barisal, he continued to see visions, hear voices and feel unusual sensations. There were also some "prophesies of future" and "suggestions for practical work." Meanwhile he was meeting with people and delivering public speeches. It is clear from the diary that his experiences continued while he was interacting with others. (Ibid. pp. 187–8)*

The *Karmayogin* was a success, but some of the younger men found it "a bitter pill to swallow." They were expecting "the same sort of hard-hitting commentary that Aurobindo published in *Bande Mataram*, but in the *Karmayogin* he seemed just as likely to speak about yoga, philosophy, or art as about the political situation."

Over time, however, Aurobindo devoted more and more space to attacks on the Government and on the Moderates. When Edward Baker, the new lieutenant-governor of Bengal, demanded the cooperation of the people, Aurobindo wrote that it was a natural enough desire "under normal circumstances," but pointed out that "the circumstances in India are not normal." On the platform, Aurobindo was "even more outspoken":

*"Imprisonment in a righteous cause was not so terrible as it seemed," he told his audience in Calcutta. He had heard that the police were planning to deport him. He "was not a model of courage," he said, but "residence for the best part of a year in a solitary cell had been an experience which took away all the terrors of deportation." In fact, as he had "an unfortunate temper," "intimidation only made him persist in doing his duty more obstinately."*

*Aurobindo's speeches were much remarked on, and much of the reaction was negative . . . . Sister Nivedita observed in a letter to a friend that Aurobindo "is lecturing widely, and I think unwisely. But he believes himself divinely impelled and therefore not to be arrested. Of course many of us do strange things, because, for reasons known only to ourselves, 'We can no other' — but certainly GOD gives no promise of indemnity!" She summed up that "religious experience and strategy are by no means the same thing, and ought not to be confused." (Ibid. p. 191)*

"Aurobindo was not wrong" concerning deportation, writes Heehs. In the general "post-Alipore" decline of the national movement he was, to British ears, "the only discordant note." Lieutenant-Governor Baker considered him "the most disturbing factor at present in the province," Baker's counterpart in Eastern Bengal and Assam called him a "dangerous character," and viceroy held him

“chiefly responsible” for “the evils of the situation.” The British were, in fact, examining three different ways to eliminate him: appeal, deportation, and prosecution.

Meanwhile, Aurobindo urged his listeners to remain firm: “Remember the people of England do not understand weakness. . . . They only understand resolution, steadfastness and determination.” He got the first warning of deportation through Sister Nivedita in July 1909. The crucial one came on 15 February 1910 “or at most a day or two later”:

*Aurobindo . . . and some others were sitting at the [Karmayogin] office when their friend Ramchandra Majumdar burst in. In an agitated voice, he said that Aurobindo was about to be arrested. A relative of his who worked in the police department had told him that a warrant had been issued. . . . The young men began talking about what they would do. Aurobindo said nothing. After a minute, he stood up and announced that he was going to Chandernagore. He, Suresh [Chandra Chakravarty], Biren [Ghose] and Ramchandra left the office almost immediately. Taking a twisting path through the alleys of north Calcutta, Ramchandra led them to the Hooghly. Seeing a boat at the ghat, he called out: “Hey, do you want a fare?” The boatman came over, and Aurobindo, Suresh and Biren got in. Within minutes they were on their way.*

*Years later Aurobindo explained that when he heard Ramchandra’s warning, he went within and heard a voice — an *adesh* — that said “Go to Chandernagore.” He obeyed it without reflection. . . .*

*By his own account, his “habit in action was not to devise beforehand and plan but to keep a fixed purpose, watch events, prepare forces and act when he felt it to be the right moment.” The moment for his departure had come. As he sailed up the Hooghly in his little wooden boat, he probably was not looking further ahead than the next few days. (Ibid. pp. 204–5)*

Upon reaching Chandernagore, one of five French settlements in India, Aurobindo sent a messenger to the only person he knew there: Charuchandra Roy, “a high school principal who had founded a revolutionary group.” Charuchandra too had spent some months in Alipore jail. Unlike Aurobindo, he remembered them as “the most terrible of his life” and consequently refused to help. Instead, he advised that Aurobindo should go to France. This “caused some merriment back at the boat. Did the recusant revolutionary expect them to sail their little craft all the way to Marseille? Not knowing what to do, but certain his voice had not misled him, Aurobindo remained in the boat with his two companions. After an hour or so,” they were rescued by Motilal Roy, “a fervent admirer of Aurobindo’s” who came sprinting as soon as he heard of Aurobindo’s arrival and Charuchandra’s refusal.

With Motilal’s help, Aurobindo spent in Chandernagore six weeks “entirely engaged in *Sadhana*.” Motilal too was “fascinated by yoga.” “Perhaps out of gratitude for the young man’s assistance,” writes Heehs, “Aurobindo set aside his reticence and answered questions. He had spoken about yoga with others before, but had never treated anyone as a disciple. Motilal may have been his first. Before leaving Chandernagore, he gave him one or more mantras, the traditional sign of initiation.”

Aurobindo left for Pondicherry in response to *adesh* that he received “sometime in March.” Taking elaborate precautions, he boarded the steamer *Dupleix* on April 1, and reached the capital of French India on April 4, 1910. “At the time of his departure, Aurobindo was planning to remain in Pondicherry for a few months, perhaps a year.” This included staying underground “until the charges against him [in British India] were disproved.” Beyond that, “the length of his retirement depended on his *sadhana*. A process had begun that he intended to see through to the end. As it turned out,” concludes Heehs, “he remained in solitude for the rest of his life.”

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In Pondicherry, Aurobindo and his companions (Bijoy Nag and Suresh Chandra Chakravarty) were sheltered by a group of Tamil nationalists who were themselves refugees. Srinivasacharya Iyengar and Subramania Bharati (the owner and the editor, respectively, of the nationalist newspaper *India* banned in British India) approached their friend Sankara Chettiar, who offered an apartment on the top floor of his house.

“Aurobindo was hoping for a place of his own,” remarks Heehs, but when he saw that the apartment was “as good a hiding place as anyone might desire,” he and the others moved in at once. Despite all the precautions taken, the British-paid detectives “identified them not long after their arrival. Thereafter there were always a group of plainclothesmen sitting across the street.” Two weeks into their stay,

*Aurobindo, Bijoy, and Suresh noticed an increase of activity in the normally moribund town. Gangs of drunken men roamed through the streets, shouting, throwing stones, and intimidating anyone who happened to be out. When the newcomers asked what the trouble was, they were told: no trouble, just the French elections. Selected male residents of Pondicherry enjoyed the right to elect a representative to the French Chamber of Deputies. All of the candidates were French, and few had ever laid eyes on the colony. Every four years, two contenders — one for the European and one for the Hindou (Indian) party — paid agents in Pondicherry to do what was necessary to get them elected. The agents engaged in massive electoral fraud, hiring bands of local hooligans to make sure the voting went their way. The Indian party had been successful in the last few elections because its mafia was better organized. But in 1910 a faction of the party switched to the other side. The violence was worse than ever, reaching its peak on election day, April 24. When the ballots were counted, the European candidate, a Parisian journalist named Paul Bluysen, was pronounced the winner. (Ibid. pp. 222–3)*

“Aurobindo’s only regular visitors were Srinivasacharya and Bharati,” notes Heehs. Among the few who managed to meet Aurobindo was Paul Richard, a barrister at the Court of Appeals in Paris. “Aurobindo, at first distant, eventually warmed to the Frenchman.” Paul Richard “began to feel that the two of them were destined to work together.” “Richard had plenty of ideas” for the future, writes Heehs, “but for the moment he had to return to France. While there, he would speak to people he knew about the plight of the refugees of Pondicherry. The two said good bye and agreed to stay in touch.”

In October 1910 Aurobindo rented a house at 42 rue de Pavillon owned by Sundara Chettiar (a relative of Sankara Chettiar). There he started a comparative study of Tamil and Sanskrit, which soon

*launched him into a “far more interesting research”: to discover the “true law, origins and, as it were, the embryology of the Aryan tongues.” This led him to the Vedas. Despite his familiarity with the Upanishads and the Gita, he had only a passing acquaintance with these most ancient of Indian scriptures. When he took them up in Pondicherry, he was surprised to discover a concealed system of psychological meanings that threw light on his yogic experiences. Pursuing this research, he wrote commentaries, translations, and notes on the significance of Vedic root-words and their relationship to those of other languages. (Ibid. p. 228)*

His theory of the psychological meaning of the Vedas appeared four years later in a series of essays with translations of selected hymns, later republished as *The Secret of the Veda*.

In April 1911 Aurobindo took a two-year lease on a house at 10 rue St. Louis. He “still had not abandoned his idea of returning to Bengal when his *sadhana* was finished, but the two-year lease makes it clear that he did not think this would happen anytime soon.” A year later, “just after his birthday on August 15, 1912,” he wrote to Motilal Roy:

*My subjective Sadhana may be said to have received its final seal and something like its consummation by a prolonged realisation and dwelling in Parabrahman for many hours. Since then, egoism is dead for all in me except the Annamaya Atma, — the physical self which awaits one farther realisation before it is entirely liberated from occasional visitings or external touches of the old separated existence. (Ibid. p. 232)*

In Aurobindo's system of yoga, explains Heehs, *parabrahman* is the "the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects," and its realisation was the third of the "four great realisations on which his Yoga and his spiritual philosophy are founded." It prepared the way for the final realisation, "that of the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind." Of these, writes Heehs, "he was only dimly aware in August 1912." By the realisation of *parabrahman* he gained "the essential knowledge or Shakti [power]." His future *sadhana*, he wrote to Motilal, would be "for life, practical knowledge and Shakti . . . established in the same physical self and directed to my work in life." That work would have four parts:

*1. To re-explain the Sanatana Dharma [eternal law of being] to the human intellect in all its parts, from a new standpoint. . . . Sri Krishna has shown me the true meaning of the Vedas . . . [and] a new Science of Philology showing the process and origins of human speech so that a new Nirukta [Vedic etymology] can be formed and the new interpretation of the Veda based upon it. He has also shown me the meaning of all in the Upanishads that is not understood either by Indians or Europeans. I have therefore to re-explain the whole Vedanta and Veda in such a way that it will be seen how all religion arises out of it and is one everywhere. In this way it will be proved that India is the centre of the religious life of the world and its destined saviour through the Sanatana Dharma.*

*2. On the basis of Vedic knowledge, to establish a Yogic Sadhana which will not only liberate the soul, but prepare a perfect humanity and help in the restoration of the Satya Yuga [Age of Truth]. That work has to begin now but it will not be complete till the end of the Kali [Iron Age].*

*3. India being the centre, to work for her restoration to her proper place in the world; but this restoration must be effected as a part of the above work and by means of Yoga applied to human means and instruments, not otherwise.*

*4. A perfect humanity being intended, society will have to be remodelled so as to be fit to contain that perfection. (Ibid. p. 233)*

This program would keep Aurobindo busy for the rest of his life. So far he had registered considerable progress in the first project. By the end of 1912, his ledgers were "filled with different sorts of writings: translations of and commentaries on the Upanishads, essays on philosophy and yoga, studies of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, a translation of Kalidasa . . . and two medium-length poems. This flood of writing soon spilled over into ten or twenty other notebooks."

In his letter to Motilal he mentioned that he had "begun but on a very small scale the second part" of his work: "making men for the new age by imparting whatever Siddhi [perfection] I get to those who are chosen." "From this point of view," he continued, "our little colony here is a sort of seed plot, a laboratory. The things I work out in it, are then extended outside." The "little colony" was, explains Heehs,

*Aurobindo's household, consisting for the moment of himself and four or five others. His work with them was "progressing at last on definite lines and with a certain steadiness, not very rapid, but still definite results are forming." It is not unusual for a man of realization to transmit his discipline to others. What may have been unique in Aurobindo's case was his doing so without letting his "disciples" know what he was doing, or even asking them to follow a spiritual life. (Ibid. p. 234)*

When Motilal alluded to the Ramakrishna Mission, “Aurobindo clarified that he had no desire to found a religious body.” He had “the greatest respect for Ramakrishna and Vivekananda,” Heehs writes,

*But he felt that the Mission had fallen into the “error of all ‘Churches’ and organised religious bodies.” By keeping “too much to the forms of Ramakrishna & Vivekananda,” the people of the Mission made it impossible to “keep themselves open for new outpourings of their spirit.” He was determined to prevent such stultification. His yoga would have no prescribed methods, no fixed forms. (Ibid. p. 234)*

“Before he came to Pondicherry,” Heehs observes, Aurobindo’s yoga “had proceeded along fairly traditional lines. But by 1912 he could write to a friend of ‘a new system of Yoga’ that had been ‘revealed’ to him.” Talking to another visitor in July 1912, he stressed “the unorthodoxy and unexpectedness of his yoga” and explained that his was “not the conventional method of Patanjali [the author of the Yoga Sutras],” but “the natural method” he had “stumbled upon in his meditations.”

Unlike the traditional paths of yoga, which aim at absorption in the Absolute and tend “to draw away from the common existence,”

*His own path aimed instead at reuniting “God and Nature in a liberated and perfected human life.” It relied on methods that “not only permit but favour the harmony of our inner and outer activities and experiences in the divine consummation of both.”*

*Aurobindo expressed this aim and method in his daily practice. Rejecting the ascetic life, he did yoga as a “householder.” He avoided fixed techniques, spent much of his time reading and writing (and not only about “spiritual” subjects), and passed an hour or two in the evening talking and joking with friends. He lived in a rented house, wore ordinary clothes, observed no dietary restrictions, smoked, and occasionally drank. It became a matter of principle not to reject any human activity, but to incorporate all of life into his yoga. He liked to quote the Latin maxim nihil humani alienum, “nothing human is alien to me.” (Ibid. p. 238)*

“Aurobindo had been a smoker since his student days in England,” Heehs notes in passing. His conviction that “yoga had nothing to do with what one ate, drank, or inhaled made him unwilling to give up the habit. Once when someone suggested that his persistent cough was due to his cigars, he flared up, saying: ‘If the cigars are going to kill me I am not worthy of living. I would prefer to die.’”

His new system of yoga “came to him in a series of Sanskrit formulas during his early years in Pondicherry. There were seven main formulas, each of which had four main elements. This gave the system its name: *sapta chatusthaya*, the seven quaternaries.” The seventh quaternary

*gives an overview of the system. Its four elements are shuddhi, purification; mukti, liberation; bhukti, beatitude or enjoyment; and siddhi, perfection. These are the traditional aims of the practice of tantric yoga. Yogic systems based on the tantras differ from those based on Sankhya and Vedanta in that they take as their central principle not the purusha or conscious soul, but rather “Prakriti, the Nature-Soul, the Energy, the Will-in-Power executive in the universe.” As a result, there is a difference of approach. The tantric yogi, “instead of drawing back from manifested Nature and its difficulties . . . confronted them, seized and conquered.” Aurobindo’s yoga was not identical to traditional tantric yoga, but like tantric yoga, it aimed at perfection and transformation of the world and life. (Ibid. p. 239)*

“Sapta Chatusthaya” is included in *Record of Yoga* (RY, pp 3–32), which for the most part is made up of personal diaries. These show “in fascinating detail the movement of Aurobindo’s *sadhana*”:

*Beginning a new notebook in November 1912, he wrote: "The regular record of the sadhana begins today, because now the perceptions are clear enough to render it of some real value and not merely a record of mistakes and overstatements." This entry marked the beginning of a long period of progress, though he remained generally dissatisfied with the state of his yogic practice. . . .*

*In a letter to Motilal written at the end of February or beginning of March 1913, Aurobindo spoke of "a very brilliant advance in January and the early part of February." The Record for those months is filled with varied developments in the elements of knowledge and power, as well as others such as dasya, the surrender of the personal will to the will of the divine. By January 31, 1913, with the rapidity of the advance increasing, Aurobindo felt that "finality [was] in sight." But before the week was out, there was an "attack of pronounced asiddhi [imperfection]"; this lasted for as many weeks as the advance, and "seemed to reverse much of what had already been accomplished and recorded." (Ibid. p. 244)*

Aurobindo's diaries are "remarkable not only as a chronicle of unusual experiences, but as the self-critical journal of a practitioner who was never satisfied with anything short of perfection":

*Calm — shanti — was the first element of Aurobindo's yoga; balance — samata — was its basis. Asked in 1926 about his ability to overcome the difficulties of yoga, he replied: "A perfect yoga requires perfect balance. That was the thing that saved me — the perfect balance. First I believed that nothing was impossible and at the same time I could question everything." (Ibid. pp. 247–8)*

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"Aurobindo's *annus mirabilis* came in 1914," says Heehs, but in this "year of remarkable events,"

*the one that would be looked back on as the most significant passed all but unnoticed when it occurred. In the evening on March 29, 1914 Aurobindo wrote in his diary: "The afternoon & evening taken up by R's visit, Bh's & translation of Rigveda II.23 & 24." "Bh" was Subramania Bharati making his usual evening visit; "R" was Paul Richard, who had returned to Pondicherry after an absence of almost four years. Aurobindo did not mention Paul's wife Mirra. As the two men spoke of politics, philosophy, and social change, Mirra sat quietly, absorbed in her immediate experience. From the instant she saw Aurobindo, she later explained, she was convinced that he was her spiritual master. A few moments in his presence was enough to overturn all that she had done on her own. (Ibid. p. 250)*

"Yet she was far from being a novice," points out Heehs, before providing an outline of her life and spiritual development. She had first met Paul Richard sometime around 1907 on one of the meetings that she had been conducting in Paris:

*Their relationship from the beginning was one of intellectual and spiritual collaboration. Encouraged by Mirra, Paul wrote works of spiritual philosophy, or rather dictated works that Mirra wrote down in proper French. L'éthère vivante [The Living Ether] was followed by Les dieux (The Gods), which contrasted the despotic personal God of [conventionalised] Christianity with the inner divine presence. (Ibid. p. 254)*

The Richards resolved to stay in India for one or two years, and it was actually Paul who proposed to start a journal. Initially called *The New Idea*, it was later renamed to *Arya*. For Aurobindo,

*The ârya or Aryan was not a person who belonged to a particular race — a misconception later taken up and distorted by the Nazis — or recognized a particular creed. Rather, the Aryan was a person who "accepted a particular type of self-culture, of inward and outward practice, of ideality, of aspiration." (Ibid. p. 256)*

In line with this ideal, the *Arya* would publish “synthetic studies in speculative Philosophy,” “translations and commentaries of ancient texts,” “studies in Comparative Religion,” and “practical methods of inner culture and self-development.” The first six or seven issues were published both in English and in French. The French edition had to be discontinued in February 1915, when Paul Richard was ordered to return to France and join his regiment:

*Leaving Pondicherry was more of a shock to Mirra than to her husband. Over the last ten months, she had felt fulfilled in her inner life as never before. Now she was deeply shaken. What did the divine intend for her? After long meditation, she came to understand that “the time of repose and preparation was over”; it was time for her to “turn her regard to the earth.” She accepted this, but was still convinced that her place was in Pondicherry. And surely (she told herself) Aurobindo thought so too. If he asked her to stay, she would have done so without hesitation; but far from doing this, he “even appeared to wish that I should go away.” . . . “Bitter solitude!” she wrote [in her diary] on March 3, “and always that strong impression of having been thrown headlong into a hell of darkness. At no other time, in no other circumstance, have I ever felt myself living in surroundings so totally opposed to all that I am conscious of as true, of all that is the essence of my life.” (Ibid. pp. 260–1)*

“There is no way of knowing what Aurobindo was thinking at this time,” continues Heehs. In his personal diaries “there is no special mention of Mirra Richard, nor evidence . . . that he regarded her as more than a ‘European yogi’ of unusual attainments.” Nevertheless, it is clear from other sources that he had developed

*a great regard for the couple. They were, he wrote Motilal, “rare examples of European Yogins who have not been led away by Theosophical and other aberrations.” Though he had reservations about parts of Paul’s philosophy, he considered him “not only a personal friend” but also “a brother in the Yoga.” As for Mirra, she seemed to have a capacity for spiritual surrender that rivaled that of the great Indian bhaktas or devotees. (Ibid. p. 258)*

But this passage may not give the whole picture. “Years later,” Heehs adds, Aurobindo “explained that he was aware at once that Mirra’s aptitude for yoga was extraordinary, while Paul’s was at best mediocre.”

After the departure of the Richards, Aurobindo carried on with the *Arya* alone. It meant producing sixty-four pages of philosophy and related writings month after month, for more than six years. When he “paused to restate the *Arya*’s ideal” in 1915, he stressed that

*The journal had not been conceived as “the mouthpiece of a sect, school or already organised way of thinking.” It was an attempt “to feel out for the thought of the future.” In recent centuries, human progress had been “almost entirely centred in the twin continents of Asia and Europe.” The first of these served “predominantly (not exclusively) as a field for man’s spiritual experience and progression,” the second “as a workshop for his mental and vital activities.” Europe’s material concentration had led it to moral and intellectual bankruptcy and a self-destructive war; Asia’s spiritual concentration had resulted in a different sort of bankruptcy, showing “how low a race can fall which in its eagerness to seek after God ignores His intention in humanity.” The best hope for the future was “the mutual interpenetration of the two great currents of human effort.” (Ibid. p. 262)*

For this to happen, “the right idea and the right way of harmony” had to be found, and the “ancient and eternal spiritual truth of the Self” had to be restated “so that it shall re-embrace, permeate, dominate, transfigure the mental and physical life” of humanity. During the six and a half years of *Arya*’s existence,

*Aurobindo never strayed far from [its] fivefold project: to reinterpret the Indian tradition, to develop a metaphysics based on the truths of spirit and nature, to uncover the principles of yoga by which these truths could be experienced, to show how the same truths could be applied to political and social life, and to make them the basis of a spiritualized literature and art. (Ibid. p. 263)*

Heehs devotes more than forty pages to insightful summaries of major works such as *The Secret of the Veda*, *Isha Upanishad*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* or *The Life Divine*. He is a keen observer and a gifted interpreter of gradual shifts in Aurobindo's position:

*In 1912, Aurobindo wrote that his "religious and philosophical mission" would be "to re-explain the Veda and Vedanta (Upanishads) in the ancient sense which I have recovered." When he began to publish the Arya two years later, he still regarded the Veda and Vedanta as the primary sources of his philosophy. But by 1918, when he paused to look back on the first four years of the journal, he took a more self-reliant stand. If he continued to write on Indian scriptures, he said, it was to show that the truths of his own philosophy "were not inconsistent with the old Vedantic truth." (Ibid. p. 268)*

The Upanishads remained central to his vision,

*as he had shown in his analysis of the Isha and a commentary on the Kena that was published in 1915 and 1916. But he did not accept uncritically all that the Upanishads said. Taken as a whole, he wrote in July 1916, the Kena seemed to call for "a rejection of the life of the cosmos." To the extent that it did, it had to be rejected for, after all, "it is only the ignorant soul that will make itself the slave of a book." Where the Kena presented the truth of the brahman, "its aid to humanity" was "indispensable." But "where anything essential is missing, we must go beyond the Upanishads to seek it, — as for instance when we add to its emphasis on divine knowledge the indispensable ardent emphasis of the later teachings upon divine love and the high emphasis of the Veda upon divine works." In the next issue of the Arya, he took up the scripture that harmonized the paths of knowledge, love, and works better than any other: the Bhagavad Gita. (Ibid. p. 268)*

In speaking about Aurobindo as a philosopher we must keep in mind his experiential standpoint. "It would be inaccurate," notes Heehs, "to say that he was innocent of philosophy" when he wrote *The Life Divine*, yet the only works that he regularly cited in it

*were the Gita, Upanishads, and Rig Veda. His philosophy, he explained, "was formed first" by the study of these works, which were also "the basis of my first practice of Yoga; . . . I was never satisfied till experience came and it was on this experience that later on I founded my philosophy." But his experience was not confined to confirming the insights of ancient sages. He once wrote in a personal note that as he sat in meditation. . . "All sorts of ideas came in which might have belonged to conflicting philosophies but they were here reconciled in a large synthetic whole." These ideas and their synthesis were self-validating for Aurobindo, and most of his followers accept them as unquestionable truths. (Ibid. pp. 276–7)*

But a philosophical system has to be defended by logical arguments, otherwise

*it becomes a religion. Aurobindo did not want his teaching to be regarded as a religion and therefore used logic to present and defend it — but not, he stressed, to arrive at it. In reaching his conclusions, he owed nothing, he said, "to intellectual abstractions, ratiocination or dialectics; when I have used these means it was simply to explain my philosophy and justify it to the intellect of others." (Ibid. p. 277)*

That is why, concludes Heehs,

*Most members of the philosophical profession — those who have read him at all — would be loath to admit him to their club. His methods simply do not fit in with the discipline as it is currently practiced. . . . Yet [Aurobindo] created a synthesis of spiritual thought that bears comparison with the best of similar systems: those of Plotinus, Abhinavagupta, and Alfred North Whitehead. Even if his critics deny him the label of philosopher — a label he never claimed for himself — his philosophical writings will continue to be studied by lay and academic readers. (Ibid. p. 277)*

The style of Arya writings, observes Heehs, is “involved and, by modern standards, frequently obscure”:

*Like other writers trained in the classical tradition, Aurobindo loved the periodic sentence, in which clause follows clause follows clause, until sometimes the point of the statement is lost in a maze of qualifications. His was the last generation to write like that in English. The twenty-first-century reader of Dryden, Ruskin, Aurobindo, Virginia Woolf, or continental writers such as Michel Foucault, must develop what British literary critic Philip Davis calls “immersed attention” to be able to profit from this style. The rewards of persistence are a wide understanding that is hard to arrive at when the subject is offered up in the curt, journalistic prose that is favored today. (Ibid. p. 328)*

When I first read the above passage, I understood Heehs to mean that Aurobindo remained stuck in the classical tradition (which Heehs seemed to equate with obscurity of style) throughout his life. This clearly does not square with the facts. Aurobindo’s early writings, then, should have been as “obscure” as the later ones, if not more. But it is the other way round. On the level of ideas, his first published piece, *India and the British Parliament* (BM), is crystal clear. So are his other early political writings. Moreover, the classical style is not necessarily obscure. Heehs himself praises the clarity and brevity of certain Arya writings. He admires *Isha Upanishad* (IU) for its “carefully chiseled sentences [which] leave much for the reader to reflect upon,” and the short essays, *Superman* and *Evolution* (EPY), for the “accessible, literary way” in which they deal with the topics of causality, destiny, fate and free will. In fact, Aurobindo used a variety of styles, each for a purpose. His Arya writings are certainly “involved,” but the charge of obscurity hardly applies to *The Secret of the Veda*, *The Human Cycle*, or *Essays on the Gita*. While the first leans towards the scholarly style, the third employs a free literary form:

*We are told continually by many authoritative voices that the Gita, opposing in this the ordinary ascetic and quietistic tendency of Indian thought and spirituality, proclaims with no uncertain sound the gospel of human action, the ideal of disinterested performance of social duties, nay, even, it would seem, the quite modern ideal of social service. To all this I can only reply that very patently and even on the very surface of it the Gita does nothing of the kind and that this is a modern misreading, a reading of the modern mind into an ancient book, of the present-day European or Europeanised intellect into a thoroughly antique, a thoroughly Oriental and Indian teaching. . . .*

*But here there is this farther difficulty that the action which Arjuna must do is one from which his moral sense recoils. It is his duty to fight, you say? But that duty has now become to his mind a terrible sin. How does it help him or solve his difficulty, to tell him that he must do his duty disinterestedly, dispassionately? He will want to know which is his duty or how it can be his duty to destroy in a sanguinary massacre his kin, his race and his country. . . . Is he then to act dispassionately in the sense of not caring whether it is a sin or what its consequences may be so long as he does his duty as a soldier? That may be the teaching of a State, of politicians, of lawyers, of ethical casuists; it can never be the teaching of a great religious and philosophical Scripture which sets out to solve the problem of life and action from the very roots. And if that is what the Gita has to say on a most poignant moral and spiritual problem, we must put it out of the list of the world’s Scriptures and thrust it, if anywhere, then into our library of political science and ethical casuistry. (Essays on the Gita, pp. 31–4)*

After re-reading Heehs’s remarks in their totality, I realised that they only amount to saying that Aurobindo used the “clause follows clause follows clause” style as a legitimate means of expression in certain situations. These, for various reasons, abound in *The Life Divine* and (to a lesser degree) in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, his twin volumes of spiritual philosophy and practice.

Both of these works reflect Aurobindo’s own spiritual experiences, and both revolve around the notion of intermediary planes of consciousness leading to “supermind,” the key concept of his spiritual system. “The *Synthesis* contains few explicitly autobiographical passages,” writes Heehs,

*but it is clear that when Aurobindo described the realization of the passive self, the active self, and the transcendent divine, he was sketching his own trajectory. . . . The last chapters of the “Yoga of Integral Knowledge” deal with what he called his fourth “fundamental realisation,” the passage from mind to supermind. It is this that he was concerned with during the years he worked on the Synthesis.*

*The supermind is the level or plane that links the superior planes of existence, consciousness, and bliss with the lower planes of body, life, and mind. A plane, Aurobindo explained . . . is “general settled poise or world of relations between Purusha and Prakriti, between the Soul and Nature.” Normally we are acquainted only with the “lower triple Purusha”: the soul inhabiting the principles of matter, life, and mind. But it is possible to turn the hierarchy of planes into a “ladder of self-transcendence,” rising through the intermediary levels above mind into supermind, and finally into the planes of pure bliss, consciousness, and being. (The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, p. 283)*

This “ladder of self-transcendence” consists of the planes of consciousness called (in Sri Aurobindo’s final terminology) the Higher Mind, the Illumined Mind, the Intuition plane, and the Overmind. The dividing line between the Overmind and the Supermind separates the lower and the higher hemispheres of the Indian tradition.

Our normal psychological existence is characterised by a multitude of clashing drives. We conceive of a course of action, but our will is often unable to enforce it against the insistence of vital desires. As we ascend the levels of consciousness, this rift between the cognitive and the dynamic aspects of our being progressively diminishes until, in supermind, it completely disappears. We can therefore equally arrive at the notion of supermind through the idea of creative dynamism:

*It is possible for individuals in the lower hemisphere to break free from the limitations of body, life, and mind. Ascending in consciousness into sat-chit-ananda, many such individuals look on matter, life, and mind as creations of maya, a mysterious power of illusion. But, according to Aurobindo, the power that creates separate, apparently illusory beings is an inferior form of maya. There is also a higher or divine maya that is a “power of infinite consciousness to comprehend, contain in itself and measure out, that is to say, to form — for form is delimitation — Name and Shape out of the vast illimitable Truth of infinite existence.” This higher maya, which Aurobindo calls “supermind,” is “the nature of the divine being . . . in its action as the Lord and Creator of its own worlds.” Unlike mind, which works by means of division and finds unity only through construction, supermind is simultaneously aware of the unity of brahman and the multiplicity of the universe. Standing between the oneness of the higher hemisphere and the divisiveness of the lower, supermind is the principle by which the two can be reconciled. (Ibid. p. 273)*

In Aurobindo’s path of yoga, the reconciliation is effected by a series of alternating ascents and descents of consciousness, rising through the planes above ordinary mind, and calling down their powers, until at last supermind itself is reached and begins its transformative descent. The process is long and difficult, but he saw that nothing less would suffice for the spiritual remoulding that he believed to be the only true and lasting solution to the problems of human existence. He therefore decided that he would not emerge from his solitude or re-enter the public life of the country until he had reached the supermind and brought about its descent into his physical consciousness.

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The appearance of *Arya* coincided with the outbreak of World War I. Aurobindo was “under no illusion” that India would benefit by the defeat or weakening of Britain: “an invasion of India by Germany, Russia or Japan” would then be “only a question of time.” As he wrote to Motilal Roy in August 1914, India should offer limited cooperation to the British in exchange for military training and other concessions. But this cooperation should not take the forms suggested by M. K. Gandhi. Aurobindo viewed Gandhi’s initiatives as an attempt “to secure for Indians [in South Africa] the

position of kindly treated serfs.” India’s aim, Aurobindo wrote, had to be “to create a nation of men fit for independence and able to secure and keep it.”

During the war years, Aurobindo’s living conditions “remained spartan.” Enjoying “utter freedom,” the young men who lived with him let the place fall into “utter disorder.” When Motilal visited, he berated them: “Is this the way you live? And you keep him like this as well?”

*Aurobindo treated them all as his equals. If one of them brought him proofs for the Arya, he would say, “Why do you bring them here? It is my duty to take them, I am not old.” If he went to their rooms, he knocked before he entered and asked, “May I come in?” — a courtesy they found remarkable. (Ibid. pp. 312–3)*

Though Aurobindo had been out of politics for years, he was not forgotten. When Annie Besant asked him to comment on the government’s new reform scheme in 1918, he answered that it was “a cleverly constructed Chinese puzzle.” A few weeks later he replied to Congress leader Vithalbai Patel, but this was “the last opinion on a public issue he would offer for twenty-four years. The role of elder statesman did not suit him,” writes Heehs:

*Aurobindo, the revolutionary turned yogi, was a puzzle to his contemporaries and remains one to later generations. When Rabindranath Tagore published his novel Ghare Bhaire (The Home and the World) in 1916, some readers thought that the character Sandip, an ostensibly idealistic revolutionary who takes advantage of everyone he meets, was based on Aurobindo. Learning of this, Tagore wrote a letter to set the record straight: “I do not, even to this day, definitely know what is the political standpoint of Aurobindo Ghosh. But this I know positively that he is a great man — one of the greatest we have — and therefore liable to be misunderstood even by his friends. What I feel for him myself is not mere admiration, but reverence for his depth of spirituality, his largeness of vision and his literary gifts, extraordinary in imaginative insight and expression.” (Ibid. p. 316)*

The year 1919 was a “year of few outward events,” but Aurobindo’s *sadhana* was “very active.” The next year was different. “The period between March and September 1920,” Heehs notes, “marked a decisive turn in Aurobindo’s life.” In this short time “he laid the foundations of a spiritual community in Pondicherry, took renewed interest in developments in Bengal, and fended off repeated requests to lead the Indian national movement in the most momentous year of its history.”

Of the external events, by far the most important was the return to Pondicherry of Paul and Mirra Richard, along with their friend Dorothy Hodgson. They arrived from Japan on April 24, and settled at 7 rue Saint Martin. “They spent much of their time at Aurobindo’s place,” writes Heehs, “particularly in the evenings when there was a regular gathering for conversation.” On Sundays, Aurobindo and his companions reciprocated by visiting the Richards. At some of these Sunday visits,

*people noticed a surprising development. After dinner those present tended to cluster in two groups: Aurobindo and Mirra on one side, Paul and the others on another. Sometimes, when they were alone, Mirra took Aurobindo’s hand in hers. One evening, when Nolini found them thus together, Mirra quickly drew her hand away. On another occasion, Suresh entered Aurobindo’s room and found Mirra kneeling before him in an attitude of surrender. Sensing the visitor, she at once stood up. There was nothing furtive about these encounters, but they did strike observers as unusual. Neither Mirra nor Aurobindo were in the habit of expressing their emotions openly. The young men, already somewhat unhappy about the inclusion of women in their circle, and the consequent erosion of their bohemian lifestyle, were somewhat nonplussed by this turn of events. Paul Richard took it more personally. At times he could be heard muttering a phrase of garbled Tamil, setth ay pochi, by which he meant “the calamity has happened.” After a while he asked Aurobindo about the nature of his relationship with Mirra. Aurobindo answered that he had accepted her as a disciple. Paul inquired as to what form the relationship would take. Aurobindo said that it would take any form that Mirra wanted. Paul*

*persisted: "Suppose she claims the relationship of marriage?" Marriage did not enter into Aurobindo's calculations, what was important to him was Mirra's autonomy, so he replied that if Mirra ever asked for marriage, that is what she would have.*

*Paul took up the matter with his wife. According to Mirra, recalling the events forty years later, the confrontation was stormy. Aware more than ever that Mirra had made his literary and spiritual accomplishments possible, Paul demanded that she give her primary loyalty to him. Mirra simply smiled. Paul became violent, came close to strangling her, and threw the furniture out of the window. Mirra remained calm throughout, inwardly calling on the divine. For all intents and purposes this was the end of their relationship. (Ibid. pp. 326–7)*

Mirra's arrival had "an enormous impact" on Aurobindo's practice. With her help, Aurobindo told Barin, he was able to complete ten years of *sadhana* in one:

*Her assistance was especially important in turning his sadhana outward. If he had been concerned only with his own transformation or with transmitting his yoga to a limited number of people, he could have done it on his own. But for his work to have a lasting effect in the world, he needed a shakti, a female counterpart.*

*Shakti, as Aurobindo explained in The Synthesis of Yoga, is the conscious power of the divine. . . . Systems of yoga that aim at liberation regard shakti as, at best, a force that can help the individual obtain release from the limitations of mind, life and body. But systems aiming for perfection, such as tantric yoga or the way of the siddhas, see shakti as the power needed to transform oneself and the world. Tantrics and siddhas worship shakti in the form of goddesses such as Kali; some also worship women as embodiments of the divine force. This is the rationale behind the esoteric sexuality of certain forms of tantrism. The consecrated union of a human male and female is seen as a reenactment of the cosmic act of creation. Some schools of tantric yoga put so much stress on this relationship that they require male practitioners to have female sexual partners. Aurobindo made it clear that this was not the case in his yoga. "How can the sexual act be made to help in spiritual life?" he asked a disciple who posed the question. It was necessary, in the work he was doing, for the masculine and feminine principles to come together, but the union had nothing to do with sex; in fact it was possible in his and Mirra's case precisely because they had mastered the forces of desire. (Ibid. pp. 328–9)*

I have quoted these portions at length not only because of their relevance but also because they are cited as offensive by people who have started a movement to block the publication of Heehs's book in India. Speaking for myself, I fail to see what these people have found so offensive in these and related passages. Were this biography intended for devotees (who are, as Heehs puts it, "looking principally for spiritual guidance and uplift" and "want anecdotes and examples, not facts and interpretation") it would have been natural to gloss over these incidents, or even eliminate them entirely. But this is a biography for academic readers who "require a work of scholarship" and demand "facts and interpretation based on facts." Early conflicts in communities often shape their future. In choosing to include these passages, Heehs has, in my opinion, made the only decision a historian could have made.

Looking carefully at these passages, it seems to me that Heehs reconstructs the situation as accurately as possible, faithfully preserving the varying viewpoints of the direct participants. In addition — and this has been drowned out by the noise of the controversy — Heehs has depicted with equal care the other important conflicts of the period: the friction between Motilal Roy and Barin (who was released from Andamans in February 1920), the gradual estrangement of Motilal Roy and of his Prabartak Sangha (Pioneer Community), and the failure of the Bhowanipore centre in Calcutta. Viewed from this perspective, Heehs is to be commended rather than condemned for the way in which he presents these issues to academic readers. For it was the latter kind of problems

that eventually prompted Aurobindo to change his approach. In the early 1920s, his watchword was “democracy”:

*He treated everyone in the house as his equal, and did not allow others to treat him differently. No one made namaskar, salutation, when he passed, much less performed pranam, bowing, or other acts of reverence. . . .*

*Barin Ghose recalled that Aurobindo “never cared to waste his breath in a long discourse with me on his particular path of yoga.” This was true of others as well. Suresh Chakravarty had been a member of the household since 1910, but between then and the mid 1920s, Aurobindo “never even once” spoke to him about yoga. During those years Aurobindo gave “absolute individual liberty” to his companions, and it was only when they decided to take up yoga under his guidance that he began to act as their teacher. (Ibid. p. 332)*

Since mid-1920s, however,

*Aurobindo began to accept the role of guru. The change was due partly to pressure from the sadhaks, who wanted to approach him in the traditional way. But it was also the result of his own realization that the democratic ideal he favored in life was not the best for yoga. “I believed in it once,” he said. “But now I don’t. It is not possible. It will be one man’s rule now.” Yoga was not always as innocuous as its popularizers made it out to be. Aurobindo complained that at the time “anybody and everybody” was taking up yoga, repeating catch phrases and thinking they had “got the real thing.” Many ended up getting into spiritual difficulties. (Ibid. p. 338)*

The change of approach was effected gradually. As Aurobindo’s household grew in size (reaching twenty permanent members by the end of 1926), he became “less and less accessible.” He “spoke little about his progress,” writes Heehs, “but it seemed to many as though a breakthrough were imminent. Finally, on November 24, 1926 he crossed a threshold.” Descriptions of this “siddhi” of 1926 are among the best-known in the history of the community, but at the time few of the sadhaks had a clear idea of what was going on:

*It was clear to the sadhaks that something wonderful had happened, but no one knew exactly what it was. . . . Aurobindo himself said nothing about the event for almost nine years. Asked in 1935 whether the supermind was going to descend again as it had in 1926, he answered: “The descent of 1926 was rather of the Overmind, not of the Supermind proper.” Overmind, a term that he coined in 1927, is [the highest] transitional plane between mind and supermind. Its “descent,” that is, its manifestation in the physical world, was necessary before the supermind could itself descend. (Ibid. pp. 344–5)*

For the members of the household, “the exact nature of the experience was less important than its immediate consequences”:

*Three days after the descent, Aurobindo asked Barin to tell the sadhaks two things. First: “the power has descended into the unconscious,” but it was necessary to work things out in detail “by the help of that power.” Second: “Mirra is my Shakti. She has taken charge of the new creation. You will get everything from her. Give [your] consent to whatever she wants to do.” What this meant in practice was that he would not see the sadhaks any longer. The door to his room remained closed, and no one but Mirra could enter. It was she who would guide the sadhaks in their spiritual and practical affairs. (Ibid. p. 345)*

It was around this time that the sadhaks began to refer to Mirra as the Mother, and to Aurobindo as Sri Aurobindo. The Mother’s “movement to the center” meant a decisive change in her place within the community:

*Between 1923 and 1926 she had spent most of her time in seclusion, seeing and being seen by few. Even then it was clear that Sri Aurobindo considered her his shakti, but it did not automatically follow that she was intended to play an important role in the group's collective life. Few could have imagined then that within a few years she would become the point around which the life of the community turned. (Ibid. p. 355)*

For the *sadhaks*, the first part of 1927

*was a time of extraordinary and sometimes bizarre experiences. Most of them felt that "something great was going to happen." Some were able to bear the pressure; others became disturbed or lost their balance. As the difficulties mounted, the Mother went to see Sri Aurobindo. Years later she recalled what he said: "This is an Overmind creation. It is very interesting, very well done. . . . [But we] want to establish the Supermind on earth. . . ." Grasping his meaning, she meditated and within a few hours had torn down all that she had built up since November [1926]. (Ibid. p. 355)*

"Sri Aurobindo later clarified that the Mother's attempt failed because of the deficiencies of the *sadhaks*," Heehs adds. "Their lower vital and physical beings had not been able to follow her lead." "From this point forward," he concludes, "progress in the yoga moved at a slower pace."

After his retirement, Sri Aurobindo saw the disciples only three times a year, on the so-called *darshan* days: August 15, November 24 and February 21:

*The three darshan days became the main events in the community's calendar, eagerly awaited and celebrated with solemnity. Sadhaks familiar with Hindu ritual were comfortable with the procedure; after all, to most people in India, darshan means viewing an image during temple worship. Some Westerners were taken aback to see grown men and women prostrating themselves before Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Anticipating such a reaction, the Mother warned Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire, a French engineer who had recently joined the community, not to be surprised or upset by such devotional practices. The Indian disciples, she said, regarded Sri Aurobindo's house as a temple and behaved "as they would in a temple only replacing the idol by a human figure." This gave them "the fullness they need." Saint Hilaire, she allowed, was "brought up differently." He agreed that he had "less need for outer manifestations," but was not put off by the way that the others expressed their devotion. (Ibid. p. 356)*

The community continued to grow,

*a development that was, as [French disciple] Saint Hilaire wrote to his father, "a little against the wishes of Sri Aurobindo, who wants to arrive at a certain point of [inner] realization before admitting new disciples, to avoid dissipating the effect" of his practice. But people were begging with such intensity to be admitted that Sri Aurobindo was "almost obliged to accept them." (Ibid. pp. 356–7)*

One prospective *sadhak* was told

*that it would be a mistake to make "too rigid a separation" between the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, since "both influences are necessary for the complete development of the sadhana." Sri Aurobindo acted "directly on the mental and the vital being through the illumined mind," while the Mother acted "directly on the psychic being and on the emotional vital and physical nature through the illumined psychic consciousness." (Ibid. p. 357)*

The "psychic being," explains Heehs, was a new element in Sri Aurobindo's yoga:

*In earlier writings, he used the words "self" or "spirit" for the self-existent being that is one in all individuals — what the Upanishads and Gita call the atman. He used the word "soul" for the divine element in each person, something similar to the jivatman of the Gita. But the jivatman, like the atman, neither changes nor evolves. Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary cosmos requires an evolutionary*

*being, a soul that “enters into the body at birth and goes out of it at death,” retaining the essence of each incarnation and developing “a physical, a vital, a mental human consciousness as its instruments of world-experience.” Up to 1926 Sri Aurobindo had no name for this evolutionary soul. The Mother provided him with one. Théon, her teacher in occultism, had distinguished the centre divin or divine center from the être psychique or psychic being. When she mentioned the latter term to Sri Aurobindo, he took it up and adapted it to his needs. (Ibid. p. 357)*

Before 1926, Sri Aurobindo emphasized the role of the mind in yoga:

*The seeker [had] to rise through mind “into some kind of fusing union with the supramental and build up in himself a level of supermind.” This is what he had done in his own practice and he thought at first that others could follow his example. Some tried, but lacking his experience and balance, they could not repeat his success. Eventually he realized that the transformation he envisaged would be difficult if not impossible for others without a preliminary awakening of the psychic being, a development of such qualities as sincerity, devotion, and inner discrimination. To bring about this awakening was the primary aim of the sadhana under the Mother’s guidance. (Ibid. p. 358)*

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In the early phase of Sri Aurobindo’s retirement, “most of his communications with members of the ashram passed verbally through the Mother,” reports Heehs. “This changed in early 1930, when he invited letters from a few, then from most of the ashram members.” Since then, his correspondence kept “growing at an enormous rate, and soon crowded out all other types of writing”:

*In all of 1929 he wrote 25 significant replies, meaning sufficiently important to be published in the collected works of 1972. The number more than doubled in each of the three years that followed, approaching 400 in 1932. In 1933 the number more than tripled, touching the daunting figure of 1,350 significant letters for the year. This was the peak. After mid-1934 he slackened his pace somewhat, explaining that the correspondence “interferes with or entirely prevents more important sides of the work.” Nevertheless he wrote some 900 significant letters that year. Large as the numbers are, they do not adequately convey his epistolary labors. For every significant reply, he wrote ten not-so-significant ones . . . [and] read an equal number to which he gave no reply. By the middle of 1933 he was devoting ten to twelve hours daily to reading and writing letters, and his pile of unanswered mail never seemed to diminish. (Ibid. p. 366)*

“Some of those with whom Sri Aurobindo developed close relations,” continues Heehs, “felt bold enough to ask him questions . . . which everyone in the ashram was interested in but few had the nerve to bring up.” Notable in this respect (as also for its humour) is Nirodbaran’s *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo* (Nirodbaran 1995), from which Heehs quotes liberally. This book is a good antidote to fears that, after 1926, the Ashram became rigid and disciplinarian. Nirodbaran’s questions of September 1935 with Sri Aurobindo’s answers (mostly as marginal notes in Nirodbaran’s notebooks) are revealing:

**Now I hear that Y is leaving you to go to Raman Maharshi. What next?**

*You are astonished? Really, you seem to be living like a cherub chubby and innocent with his head in the clouds ignorant of the wickedness of men. I thought by this time the revolts of Y were common knowledge.*

**Not only that, he is hurling abuses, threats, most offensive words at you!**

*In his “periods” he was doing that all the time privately among his friends. Now it is publicly, that is all. Afterwards he puts on the airs of a saint and howls reproachfully at us for having believed lying reports. Another specimen of humanity.*

**A vast abyss has opened its jaws to swallow Y for ever.**

*Do you mean Ramana Maharshi? He is not an abyss and he has no desire to swallow.*

**I tell you, Sir, it will be a pathetic failure on the part of the Divine!**

*Rubbish! It will be a failure on the part of Y. I don't profess to transform men against their will.*

**If I want to hang myself, would you say, "I can't help him against his will"?**

*If that were your will and not merely an impulse of the vital being, nobody could stop you.*

**Another point — you knew that he had the monster in him, and yet you accepted him? Why? Weren't you confident about the success or was it only to give him a chance? . . .**

*Practically, D threw him in through the window in spite of Mother's refusal. After that he pleaded and got his chance on conditions, not unconditionally — conditions which he broke after the first year. Still we gave him his full chance, beyond what we had at first proposed because there was a possibility that he might go through — even if he allowed us to guide and influence, a certitude. But he wanted no more guidance and influence. Hence these tears.*

**You told him also that you would never leave him. Well? How shall we then interpret the promises you have made to others, to me for instance?**

*I don't propose to leave him, any more than I have left René. What I propose is that he should not stay here to play the humbug any longer — he must take one course or the other with his lower nature. (Nirodbaran: Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo, pp. 297–302)*

Sri Aurobindo's letters to other recipients, all different in tone and style, give evidence of the essential freedom of approach available to all the disciples:

*I may say that the way of the Gita is itself a part of the yoga here and those who have followed it, to begin with or as a first stage, have a stronger basis than others for this yoga. To look down on it, therefore, as something separate and inferior is not a right standpoint. But whatever it is, you must yourself choose, nobody can do it for you. Those who go and come, can do so profitably only if or because they have made the decision and keep to it; when they are here, it is for the yoga that they come, when they are elsewhere, the will for the yoga remains with them there. You have to get rid of your constant reasonings and see whether you can do without the impulse towards yoga or not — if you cannot, then it is useless thinking of the ordinary life without yoga — your nature will compel you to seek after it even if you have to seek all your life with a small result. But the small result is mainly due to the mind which always came in the way and the vital weakness which gives it its support for its reasonings. If you fixed your will irrevocably, that would give you a chance — and whether you followed it here or elsewhere would make only a minor difference. (Sri Aurobindo: Letters on Yoga II, [1995 edition], vol.2, p.580)*

I have selected the above passages from the original sources and not from Heehs's biography. In his section on correspondence, Heehs attempts to capture both the depth and the breadth of the correspondence by weaving a rich set of fragments into his text. He also uses the correspondence to enlarge our understanding of Sri Aurobindo's *sadhana* during the 1930s. Sri Aurobindo stopped keeping his diary in 1927, and Heehs had to sift through his correspondence for scattered hints:

*In his personal sadhana, Sri Aurobindo made satisfactory progress through November 1934. For a moment that month he thought that the event he had been waiting for, "the general descent of the Supermind into Matter," was imminent. Then something unexpected happened. As he later explained, "after November the push for descent stopped and the resistance of material Nature arose." In*

*another letter he was more graphic: "The only result of the last descent was an upsurging of subconscious mud." (The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, p. 373)*

For the next six months Sri Aurobindo was (in his own words) "busy with the mud of subconscious earth — dredging, dredging, dredging." "But, unlike his disciples," adds Heehs, "he remained in touch with the other end of being, the supermind." In December 1938, referring to his *sadhana*, he spoke of trying "to supramentalise the descended Overmind":

*He had used the same or a similar phrase to describe the current state of his sadhana in 1927 or 1928, 1933, 1934, and 1935. The similarity of phrasing suggests that during the 1930s he made little measurable progress. Certainly, as the years went by, he found that supramentalizing the overmind was a larger job than he had thought. The reason, apparently, was that the process was intertwined with the "dredging" of the subconscious. (Ibid. p. 375)*

The era of Sri Aurobindo's "epistolary labors" (and of his strict solitude) ended unexpectedly in the early hours of November 24, 1938, when he stumbled in his room and injured his leg. The *darshan* planned for that day had to be cancelled, and the complicated fracture kept him bedridden for weeks.

After the accident, the Mother set up a team of attendants and each was given a shift. At first Sri Aurobindo "hardly spoke" except to answer medical questions, but later he became "willing to talk about other topics" too. Starting with December 10, Nirodbaran and Purani "made an effort to remember and record the conversations," which were later published (Purani 1982, Nirodbaran 2001).

Sri Aurobindo's recovery was slow: "The splints on his leg were removed in February 1939, and the leg immediately swelled. . . . It took several months for the edema to subside, several more for the patient to regain a tolerable amount of flexibility in his knee." One more *darshan* had to be skipped. "Yielding to the requests of devotees," notes Heehs, "he agreed to appear on April 24," the anniversary of the Mother's return to Pondicherry. "From that point on," he adds, "April 24 became a fourth *darshan* day."

No longer burdened by the correspondence, Sri Aurobindo "began the long-postponed task of revising his major works. The first book he took up was *The Life Divine*." By the time it was published, Europe was at war:

*Sri Aurobindo had been appalled by the rise of the dictatorships in Germany, Italy, and Russia, but until the late 1930s he could see little to distinguish the new totalitarian states from the old imperial powers. Britain and France prated about democratic values, but they held on to their colonies and did nothing when Italy invaded Abyssinia or Germany annexed the Sudetenland. Before long, however, he realized that Nazi Germany's rise was too great a price to pay for Britain's fall. (Ibid. pp. 384–5)*

Here is a memorable fragment of conversation recorded by Nirodbaran on January 8, 1939:

*PURANI: Gandhi writes that the non-violence tried by some people in Germany has failed because it has not been strong enough to generate sufficient heat to melt Hitler's heart.*

*SRI AUROBINDO: It would have to be a furnace in that case. The only way to melt his heart is to bomb it out of existence.*

*(Nirodbaran: Talks with Sri Aurobindo, pp. 120–1)*

Further on Sri Aurobindo added: "The trouble with Gandhi is that he has dealt only with Englishmen. If he had been obliged to deal with Germans or Russians his non-violence would have had much less chance. The English people like to be at ease with their conscience. . . . [They] also can be very cruel — for a time — but they can't go on with a persistent brutality."

“Sri Aurobindo,” Heehs writes, “was the only important public figure in India to come out unambiguously in favor of the Western democracies.” “In public gestures,” he and the Mother donated to French and British war funds in 1940, and publicly declared their “entire support for the British people and the Empire in their struggle against the aggressions of the Nazi Reich.” They felt it was not only “a battle waged in just self-defence,” but also “a defence of civilisation and its highest attained social, cultural and spiritual values and of the whole future of humanity.”

“This declaration attracted a good deal of attention,” notes Heehs, “most of it unfriendly.” Leaders of the Congress and members of the public were “equally irate.” “Seeing the need to clarify his position,” Sri Aurobindo “released the texts of two letters he had written about the war.” “There cannot be the slightest doubt,” he stressed in one, “that if one side wins . . . there would be a reign of falsehood and darkness, a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realise.”

Another instance of his remarkable foresight (also ill-understood at the time) was his “public adhesion” to the offer conveyed by Sir Stafford Cripps in March 1942:

*After the war India would become a self-governing dominion, like Canada and Australia. Provinces and princely states could opt out if they chose. Meanwhile, “the principal sections of the Indian people” were invited to participate in the counsels of war. Indian members of the Executive Council would control all departments but defense. (The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, pp. 390–1)*

Knowing “that his advice had to reach the Congress high command,” Sri Aurobindo sent

*Duraiswami Iyer, a prominent lawyer of Madras, to Delhi to speak to members of the working committee. By the time Duraiswami reached Delhi, the offer was in mortal danger. The Mahasabha had rejected it because it conceded the possibility of Pakistan. Nehru and others were troubled about the question of defense, and Gandhi opposed anything that might encourage military action. Admitted to a closed meeting of the working committee, Duraiswami presented Sri Aurobindo’s position. Gandhi was the first to reply. If Sri Aurobindo thought the situation “so grave and serious that he has departed from his usual rule of not seeing anybody and not speaking to anybody,” then “he ought to come out and lead the country.” (Ibid. p. 391)*

“Negotiations between Cripps and Indian leaders continued,” writes Heehs, “but on April 10 the working committee delivered its final rejection.” “The possibilities that might have opened if the Cripps proposal had been accepted,” he concludes, “are among the great unanswered questions of modern Indian history.”

It took some time for the revised edition of *The Life Divine* to reach England, “and readers there had other things on their minds,”

*but to some The Life Divine offered hope amid the ruins of Western civilization. Writing in the Times Literary Supplement on January 17, 1942, Sir Francis Younghusband found that “the touch of a powerful and subtle mind is evident everywhere in exposition of his philosophy.” The most remarkable aspect of this synthesis was its world affirmation: “Mr. Aurobindo does not look upon life on earth as a preparation for life in some distant heaven above the clouds. He would make heaven on earth. He would raise men to the Divine level.” “The kingdom of God without,” he concluded, “will have to be built upon the kingdom of God that is within us. And in awakening that spirit the philosophy of Aurobindo may play a striking part.” Younghusband, a soldier, explorer, and writer of books on mystical subjects, was sufficiently impressed by *The Life Divine* to nominate its author for the Nobel Prize in Literature. The nomination, endorsed by the Royal Society of Literature, was accepted by the Swedish Academy in 1943, a year in which no prize in literature was awarded. (Ibid. p. 388)*

In the mid-1940s, Sri Aurobindo's "handwriting became so illegible [as a result of his deteriorating eyesight] that he began to dictate what he needed to write: passages for *Savitri*, revision of *Arya* works, occasional letters."

*Savitri*, an epic in blank verse and Sri Aurobindo's "most extensive literary creation," is based on a legend from the *Mahabharata*, where it is recited "as a story of conjugal love conquering death." But to Sri Aurobindo it seemed

*that it originally belonged to "one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle." His reading of the Rig Veda had shown him that legends like the killing of Vritra had an outer ritualistic and inner spiritual meaning. In a similar way, the legend of Savitri could be read as a celebration of wifely duty and as a key to the world of yoga. (Ibid. p. 299–300)*

Through successive revisions, Sri Aurobindo turned the Satyavan–Savitri tale into "a vast symbolic account" of his spiritual endeavour. "The description of a physical sunrise" in the first canto, Heehs explains, became "a symbol for the breaking of the supramental light into the obscurity of the inconscient." On the technical side, Sri Aurobindo was trying "to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movements, so far as that is a possibility in English." The following passage hints at his open-ended vision of the future:

*In the unceasing drama carried by Time. . .  
A cry came of the world's delight to be,  
The grandeur and greatness of its will to live,  
Recall of the soul's adventure into space,  
A traveller through the magic centuries  
And being's labour in Matter's universe,  
Its search for the mystic meaning of its birth  
And joy of high spiritual response,  
Its throb of satisfaction and content  
In all the sweetness of the gifts of life,  
Its large breath and pulse and thrill of hope and fear,  
Its taste of pangs and tears and ecstasy,  
Its rapture's poignant beat of sudden bliss,  
The sob of its passion and unending pain.  
The murmur and whisper of the unheard sounds  
Which crowd around our hearts but find no window  
To enter, swelled into a canticle  
Of all that suffers to be still unknown  
And all that labours vainly to be born  
And all the sweetness none will ever taste  
And all the beauty that will never be.  
Inaudible to our deaf mortal ears  
The wide world-rhythms wove their stupendous chant  
To which life strives to fit our rhyme-beats here,  
Melting our limits in the illimitable,  
Tuning the finite to infinity.*

(*Savitri*, pp. 29–30)

Much as he admired ancient India, Sri Aurobindo was acutely aware of its defects too, and knew that India's return to greatness could not be effected by a simple revival of ancient forms:

*From the view of the evolutionary future European and Indian civilisation at their best have only been half achievements, infant dawns pointing to the mature sunlight that is to come. Neither Europe nor*

*India nor any race, country or continent of mankind has ever been fully civilised from this point of view. . . . If we define civilisation as a harmony of spirit, mind and body, where has that harmony been entire or altogether real? Where have there not been glaring deficiencies and painful discords? . . . Not only are there everywhere positive, ugly, even "hideous" blots on the life of man, but much that we now accept with equanimity, much in which we take pride, may well be regarded by a future humanity as barbarism or at least as semi-barbarous and immature. (The Renaissance in India and Other Essays on Indian Culture, pp. 85–6)*

By mid-1947 India was heading at full speed towards independence. Asked by All India Radio for a message, Sri Aurobindo chose to speak about the five "world-movements he had hoped to see fulfilled in his lifetime," which in his youth had seemed to be "impracticable dreams," but which were now "arriving at fruition or on their way to fulfilment":

*His message was broadcast by All India Radio in Tiruchirapalli and Madras on August 14, 1947. The next day was observed not only as Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday but also as the first day of India's independence. In the evening the sadhaks assembled to listen to a concert of national songs in the ashram's courtyard. Without warning, the ashram was attacked by a band of armed rioters. Several ashramites were injured and one, Mulshankar Jani, was stabbed in the neck and killed. The rioters, mostly paid hooligans, had been instigated by groups that opposed the existence of the ashram, notably Communists and Tamil separatists. (The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, pp. 395–6)*

"One might almost suppose," Heehs adds, that it was "a reflection of the orgy of slaughter that was then sweeping across India. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were killed indiscriminately by their former neighbors. As many as a million people died, staining what ought to have been a joyous celebration of freedom."

In mid-1949 Sri Aurobindo began to experience health-related problems. The symptoms later subsided, but reappeared again in mid-1950. Both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother "brushed aside" the suggestion to postpone the November *darshan*:

*Some three thousand people had come, and they could not be disappointed. The atmosphere on November 24 was unusually solemn. The visitors stood silently in the street, then entered the building and climbed the stairs to Sri Aurobindo's room. To an American student, a first-time visitor, the whole procedure seemed "a bit ridiculous." What purpose could be served by standing for a moment before the author of The Life Divine without saying a word to him? (Ibid. pp. 407–8)*

"What happened next," reports Heehs, "was unexpected":

*As I stepped into a radius of about four feet [the student later recalled], there was the sensation of moving into some kind of a force field. Intuitively, I knew it was the force of Love, but not what ordinary humans usually mean by the term. These two were "geared straight up"; they were not paying attention to me as ordinary parents might have done; yet, this unattachment seemed just the thing that healed. Suddenly, I loved them both, as spiritual "parents."*

*Then, all thought ceased, I was perfectly aware of where I was; it was not "hypnotism" as one Stanford friend later suggested. It was simply that during those few minutes, my mind became utterly still. It seemed that I stood there a very long, an uncounted time, for there was no time. Only many years later did I describe this experience as my having experienced the Timeless in Time. When there at the darshan, there was not the least doubt in my mind that I had met two people who had experienced what they claimed. They were Gnostic Beings. They had realized this new consciousness which Sri Aurobindo called the Supramental. (Ibid. p. 408)*

"Two hours into the ceremony," continues Heehs, "a whisper ran down the line. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother wanted things speeded up. Everyone moved a little more quickly, and by five o'clock it was over."

“Over the next few days Sri Aurobindo’s symptoms worsened. The doctors had no alternative than to pass a catheter. This gave immediate relief, but also brought on a fever.” In the afternoon of December 3, he “began to have trouble breathing” and the blood analysis showed “all the signs of imminent kidney failure.” That evening the Mother took the doctors aside, and said: “He is fully conscious within but he is losing interest in himself.” Seeing an improvement the next morning, the doctors asked “whether he was using his yogic power to cure himself. He replied with a simple no.” Around noon his difficulties reappeared:

*In the evening the Mother returned from her activities. The doctors gave their report, adding that they wanted to arrange for intravenous transfusions. She said: “I told you this is not necessary. He has no interest in himself. He is withdrawing.” Around eleven o’clock she came again, gave him some juice, and went away. When she returned an hour later, Sri Aurobindo “opened his eyes and the two looked at each other in a steady gaze.” She again left the room, but came back at around one o’clock in the morning of December 5. This time Sri Aurobindo remained withdrawn. “What do you think?” she asked Sanyal. “Can I retire for an hour?” The doctor did not know what to say. “Call me when the time comes,” she said, and went to her room. At this point Sri Aurobindo’s breathing was so labored that he had to be given oxygen. Around 1:15, he roused himself, inquired about the time, and asked Nirodbaran for something to drink. After sipping a bit of juice, he plunged within. His attendants huddled anxiously around him. Nirodbaran and Champaklal massaged his feet while Sanyal brushed his hair. Suddenly a tremor ran through his body. He drew up his arms and placed them across his chest. At 1:26 his breathing ceased. (Ibid. pp. 409–10)*

“The outpouring of public grief that followed Sri Aurobindo’s death,” writes Heehs in the *Epilogue*,

*was remarkable considering that he had been out of public view for forty years. Only the older generation could remember his writings in Bande Mataram. Not many were able to appreciate the thought of The Life Divine or the rhythms of Savitri. Even fewer felt called upon to follow his path of yoga. Yet great masses of people felt touched by the passing of one who was, as a politician put it, “the last of the great geniuses born in the latter part of the last century.” Vivekananda, Tagore, and Gandhi had gone before him. Those who survived were of a different caliber. It was the end of an era. (Ibid. p. 413)*

“It is difficult,” Heehs admits, “to offer a balanced assessment of a man who is regarded by some as an incarnation of God and by others as a social and political reactionary”:

*In the half-century since Sri Aurobindo’s death, his reputation has continued to grow. Discussed by historians, philosophers, literary critics, and social scientists, and admired, even worshipped, by thousands of spiritual seekers, he regularly is numbered among the most outstanding Indians of the twentieth century. Like all icons, he is misrepresented by his admirers as well as his detractors, praised or reviled for things he never said or did. (Ibid. p. 413)*

Pitirim Sorokin, a professor at Harvard and one of the world’s leading sociologists, considered his works “a sound antidote to the pseudo-scientific psychology, psychiatry and educational art of the West.” Philosopher Edwin Burt gave lectures on *The Life Divine* at Cornell University, while

*Frederic Spiegelberg, professor of comparative religion at Stanford, assigned Essays on the Gita to his graduate students. The Indian’s reach would be wider, Spiegelberg believed, if American philosophy departments were not “under the anti-metaphysical influence of John Dewey and his Instrumentalists, which is the American form of what is called Logical Positivism in Europe.” (Ibid. p. 404)*

“Continental thinkers were more open” to Sri Aurobindo’s thought, Heehs observes. In the Americas, it was mostly “the literary elite” that responded: “expatriate English novelist” Aldous Huxley and Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral supported the renewed efforts

*to have Sri Aurobindo awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Mistral, laureate in 1945, joined with Pearl Buck, laureate in 1938, in announcing her willingness to nominate him for the honor. . . . Around the same time an Indian academic proposed Sri Aurobindo's name for the Nobel Peace Prize. This was one of thirty-four official nominations considered by the Norwegian Nobel Committee in 1950. (Ibid. p. 404)*

In Sri Aurobindo's view, "a man's value does not depend on what he learns or his position or fame or what he does, but on what he is or inwardly becomes." Since his arrival in Pondicherry,

*he considered his actual work to be bringing down a new principle into the "earth-consciousness." It is impossible to say anything certain about the success or failure of this endeavor. . . . He never announced that the process was complete. During his lifetime, he was often asked to write more about overmind and supermind. "What's the use?" he once replied. "How much would anybody understand? Besides the present business is to bring down and establish the Supermind, not to explain it. If it establishes itself, it will explain itself — if it does not, there is no use in explaining it." (Ibid. p. 414)*

"We are now in the second generation after Sri Aurobindo's passing," concludes Heehs his captivating and fast-paced book. Sri Aurobindo's work continues

*in his ashram, in the international community of Auroville near Pondicherry, in centers in India, the United States, and Europe, and in the minds and hearts of thousands of practitioners of his yoga. A superficial look at the organizations he inspired might give the impression that they constitute a movement of the sort he warned against in *The Human Cycle*. But a deeper look, not at organizational forms but at the practice of individuals, might give a different impression. And in the end, any attempt to transform human society must begin with individuals. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple in the mid 1930s: "After all, the best way to make Humanity progress is to move on oneself; — that may sound either individualistic or egoistic, but it isn't: it is only common sense." (Ibid. p. 415)*

Heehs's biography — an outstanding achievement in many respects — is unique in sticking scrupulously to a "sound historical methodology" from the beginning till the end. In applying historical method to spirituality there are certainly drawbacks and limitations, but the step itself is indispensable. Its purpose is to demonstrate the potential worth of things few academics take seriously — spirituality and yoga — within the academic framework, using the established historiographical methodology. At the same time, Sri Aurobindo's vision is such that it cannot be adequately represented within these constraints. Among Sri Aurobindo's biographers, Heehs is the first to have realised that the need to demonstrate the value of his thought within the established framework takes precedence over the impossibility to do so entirely. His goal is not to capture Sri Aurobindo's spiritual vision in its fullness, but to prove that Sri Aurobindo is worth further and deeper study on his own terms. In this respect, Heehs has succeeded magnificently; *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* is quickly becoming *the* biography for academics.

At the same time, the biography is a natural outgrowth of Heehs's earlier historical research and is fully compatible with his previous writings. The controversy that it stirred raises as many questions about the community of Sri Aurobindo's followers as it does about Heehs and his work. Perhaps the most important question the controversy has raised is this: How far (and in which direction) has the community drifted over the years? In regard to the book, it seems to me that once Heehs had chosen his target audience, he managed to make apt decisions concerning its tone, content and approach. The book is bound to create positive interest and perhaps even break a certain stalemate blocking Sri Aurobindo's wider recognition.

One thing remains to be seen. When, in due course, people inspired by *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* turn their attention towards the community that grew around him, what will they find? Will it be a community of the practitioners of his Integral Yoga, or a community of his devotees only, or a new

religion in the making? That, indeed, is *the* pending question, but the answer can only come from the community, not from Heehs.

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