

## BOOK REVIEW



Peter Heehs

*The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*

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### A Discerning Tribute

*Part One: Politician and Revolutionary*

by Marcel Kvassay

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 of *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond*, an anthology of Sri Aurobindo's writings edited by Heehs. Fully available online,<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "India as a Synthesis of Cultures," a review of *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond*: <http://www.sabda.in/catalog/show.php?id=eNews506#review>.

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* in PDF format can be downloaded via this URL: <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriuro/writings.php>.

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? 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*,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> Book details for Dinendra Kumar Roy's *With Aurobindo in Baroda* can be found at <http://www.sabda.in/catalog/bookinfo.php?websec=ENGD-BA-275> .

<sup>4</sup> *Documents in the Life of Sri Aurobindo*: <http://www.sriurobindoashram.org/research/show.php?set=doclife&id=contents> .

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*,<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sri Aurobindo: A Brief Biography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).



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 Nevinson, 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 — Nevinson 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 Nevinson related, “Aurobindo Ghose had already, I think, formed the project of developing out of the Con-

gress, 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)

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 both 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.



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.

Back in Calcutta in 1906, 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. I will deal with these aspects in the second part devoted to Sri Aurobindo, the "*Yogi and Philosopher*."

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