



Peter Heehs. *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. xiv + 496 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14098-0.



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Ineffable or Not: Understanding and Writing about Sri Aurobindo

In recent years, authors writing about ancient to more modern traditions, communities, and divine and not necessarily divine persons connected to South Asia have sometimes found themselves to be virtually and, thankfully more rarely, literally assailed for their interpretations. These authors and their critics, one could argue, are part of a shared discursive context, one where technologies, global circulation of ideas, and the ease of joining in on conversations can support a wonderfully diverse audience but where the consequences of a perceived misstep in interpretation may require more than a thick skin. Into this milieu, a new biography of Sri Aurobindo Ghose has arrived. *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (hereafter *The Lives*), by Peter Heehs, joins his already impressive roster of publications, many concerning Aurobindo and unpublished materials from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives of which Heehs is one of the founders. The new work covers the whole of Aurobindo's life (1872-1950). It is engagingly written and supported by a bounty of historical materials. Students of India with little familiarity of Aurobindo will discover

that Heehs offers a multisided portrait of a brilliant and enigmatic man whose lifetime spanned a momentous period in modern Indian history and whose various accomplishments bear closer examination for their content and for their discursive revelations on a variety of subjects, including revolution, violence, nationalism, poetry, metaphysics, Indian culture, Hindu texts, yoga, religion, and spiritual communities. For those already aware of Aurobindo's role in early Indian nationalist politics and his subsequent transformation into a revered spiritual leader and founder of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Heehs's biography adds many fine details from Aurobindo's own diaries and retrospective writings alongside accounts from family, friends, associates, and foes. The overall result is a masterful and inspiring biography that provides a solid foundation for further Aurobindo studies and offers plenty of cues for other kinds of historical, textual, and exegetical work that could enhance our understanding of the multiple sites in which Aurobindo lived and worked.

Since its publication, Heehs's biography has elicited

strong criticism from some members of the Aurobindo community. These reactions were anticipated by Heehs who notes, in the preface, that admirers of Aurobindo do not always agree with perspectives that do not match theirs or with interpretations that challenge existing ones (p. xii). The actual points of contention (much of which can be located on the Internet) deserve attention for their contribution to the ongoing and not always consonant discourses that constitute Aurobindo. This review, however, is only focused on Heehs's efforts to convey a portrait of Aurobindo's life, one that is intentionally non-hagiographical and draws on a multiplicity of voices to help readers approach a life from numerous perspectives.

The Lives allows readers to come to an understanding of Aurobindo that is not predetermined by Heehs. Rather, the main purpose of this biography is to allow the complex person of Aurobindo to emerge from personal accounts and writings, observations, and other historical records. Heehs maps the course of Aurobindo's life over five sections, each covering a range of roles that Aurobindo fulfilled, as son, scholar, revolutionary, yogi and philosopher, and guide. Heehs uses these sections well to allow Aurobindo's multiple "lives" to emerge in the reader's mind, first by not imposing any broader thesis to explain Aurobindo's actions and decisions throughout his life, and second, by providing the right amount of context that allows the historical materials to largely speak for themselves. Heehs also seeks to add clarity rather than further confuse certain moments and comments in Aurobindo's life that have been frequently interpreted to serve their supporters' or critics' purposes. These include Aurobindo's comments on *sanatan dharma* (traditional ethical practice) and the need for modern India to recognize its cultural legacies and spiritual gifts. Heehs makes clear that Aurobindo's essentializing of Indian culture when situated in the context of colonialism cannot be construed as synonymous with a program for Hindu supremacy. Aurobindo's concept of *sanatan dharma*, Heehs writes, "was not a matter of belief but of spiritual experience and inner communion with the Divine, the latter concept not being attached to a single religion or community but existing within and for all" (p. 187). As for Aurobindo's tacit acceptance of violence for political aims during his days as a journalist and political figure in Bengal and his subsequent abjuring of violence during his life in Pondicherry, Heehs notes that Aurobindo "never ceased to believe that Indians had the right to use violence to topple a government maintained by violence. But ... he felt more than ever that terrorist acts were against India's long-term inter-

ests" (p. 237). Concerning accusations of Aurobindo's psychological instability based on his accounts of mystical experiences, Heehs incorporates the arguments of William James, Anton Boisen, and Sudhir Kakar, and notes that Aurobindo was found to be "unusually calm, dispassionate, and loving—and eminently sane" rather than exhibiting anxieties or signs of psychological pain that would suggest a stronger connection between mystical experience and madness (p. 247). As for the serious charges that Aurobindo's focus on the Bengal boycott of British goods (*swadeshi*) and his ignoring of the role of the Hindu elite in furthering their goals over those of the Muslim minorities played a role in the communalization of violence, Heehs points out that Aurobindo's view of "religious violence as a purely social matter" rather than a potentially volatile political issue did impede a more concerted effort to include Muslim in the Extremists' agenda (p. 211). Though Aurobindo and his associates did not knowingly endorse actions that would later lead to communal violence, Heehs notes that the "focus on freedom and national autonomy was given priority over interreligious and intercaste conflict" (p. 414). Heehs finds "no contemporary evidence that his [Aurobindo's] actions or words exacerbated these [communal] problems"; nevertheless, Heehs acknowledges that Aurobindo's overlooking the social dimension was one of the freedom movement's principal failings (p. 212).

Throughout *The Lives*, the chronological and accumulative quality of the biography lends itself well especially for the final and longest sections on Aurobindo's life, covering the period from the end of his political engagement to his "active retirement" in Pondicherry as a yogi and eventually leader of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram community. During this time, Aurobindo produced many writings for publication and kept a journal of his daily yoga practice, or *sadhana* (spiritual inquiry). He also wrote consistently, formulating a metaphysics that would support the aims of his yoga. Aurobindo's writings on "spiritual" matters are not immediately comprehensible, in part due to their distinctive vocabulary, in English, and the particular intricacies of Aurobindo's ontological categories. Heehs provides a concise as possible outline for approaching Aurobindo's neologisms (not his word) and evolutionary framework for the governing relationships between the supermind, supramental, supramental Supernature, overmind, gnostic overmind, Divine, Spirit, and Nature. The fluid ease of Heehs's writing in these matters of Aurobindo's *sadhana* are an additional contribution of *The Lives*: instead of presenting this essentially devotional knowledge from the exclusive

perspectives of the insider devotee or the distanced observer, Heehs articulates Aurobindo's concepts and situates them within broader social and political contexts, including global events, such as WWI, India's independence, WWII, and the onset of the Korean War. In particular, these sections show the challenges faced by Aurobindo and his disciples in attaining the higher and highest aims of yogic practice; they reveal too the various organizational and human obstacles to creating a smooth functioning devotional community and of finding ways to sustain it, at the levels of spirit and matter. Aurobindo was often short of money both during his short years as political activist, when resources for projects, journalistic endeavors, and household maintenance were often scarce and later when he headed his growing community in Pondicherry.

As the narrative unfolds in *The Lives*, Heehs remains a measured interpreter of the historical materials he brings forth. He is a fine weaver of details. Only now and then one may wish for some more analysis of materials and their sources. And it might be helpful to know the identities connected to Heehs's more frequently cited sources. For example, Aurobindo's trusted associates Ambalal B. Purani and Nirodbaran are used extensively but introduced late in the biography (p. 315, and pp. 368, 382, respectively). Heehs does occasionally address readers directly and mostly in instances where he appreciates their possible skepticism or confusion, or to offer his awareness that some aspects of a person's inner life may best remain ineffable. These are welcome intrusions for they signal what readers may already detect, that is, Heehs's sensitivity to his biographical subject and audience alike. Toward this, perhaps there are two small matters that are certainly not weaknesses in light of the biography's enormous merits, but that point to a possibly inescapable problem when writing about a revered person's actions about which others's offense might too easily arise. On the matter of Aurobindo's prose and poetic writings, Heehs seems both firm in his critical assessment and yet somewhat delicate in his critique. Noting that Aurobindo's style is reflective of the period of his late nineteenth-century English education and observing too Aurobindo's admirable command of Western poetic traditions, Heehs appears to avoid a fuller exegesis and critique of these writings. Infrequently, Heehs shares his own affirmative feeling for a few poetic selections, most notably for those poems where Aurobindo expresses his inner spiritual experiences.

Another dimension of Aurobindo's life that, depend-

ing on readers's perspective, may seem too elliptically introduced or not explicit enough are the mentions of his yogic force and its connection to the outcome of certain world events. Heehs writes, "When Sri Aurobindo wrote to disciples about the workings of his force, he was careful to point out that it acted under conditions, as one among many forces at play. Nevertheless, he took his force and its material effects quite seriously." The subject of yogic force is prematurely shut off by the statement from Heehs, "To talk about the force without the basis of experience would open the way to credulity or incredulity, both of which he [Aurobindo] deplored" (p. 387). Heehs, it seems, prefers not to overly dwell on what may appear to be ineffable experiences or where an experiential foundation seems a condition for understanding. Yet Heehs has taken up the challenge of helping readers to understand a complex person who combined great learning with a personal drive to enter into the realm of the metaphysical, and who spent half of his life to attain an ontological state for which no ready proof existed of its possible attainment. Does this suggest that there are limits to the form of historical biography that Heehs has offered? More optimistically, perhaps in this instance, it would have helped readers to appreciate if not accept Aurobindo's claims if the feelings of devotees's concerning yogic force could have been shared. The same might be said for readers having a stronger sense of how Aurobindo's more well-known poems, such as *Savitri*, continue to have tremendous resonance for devotees. Including this kind of ethnographic data, one to which it seems Heehs would have ready access, would go some ways to filling the gap between Aurobindo's yogic teachings and the deeply individual efforts of disciples to attain the desired ontological results.

Heehs's abilities to balance his admiration for Sri Aurobindo with a historian's scrupulousness towards source have resulted in what may likely be the definitive biography of Aurobindo. Even then, beyond being a compelling account of Aurobindo's many lives, Heehs's text contains unexpected and intriguing details, some more striking by their absence than presence. What accounts for the seemingly steady stream of Gujarati disciples in Pondicherry? Could Aurobindo's poetry be productively analyzed with Victorian, Georgian, and Modernist poetic works? It is now the task of others to consider the rich veins of information that are exposed in *The Lives* and to expand these into compelling texts. This invitation, moreover, would include those who have found Heehs's version of Aurobindo's life to be less than acceptable.

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