Heehs on Sri Aurobindo and Indian Communalism

Marcel Kvassay

"The problem of Indian communalism (politicized religious conflict) has generated an enormous literature" — with these words Peter Heehs opens the Pandora's box of modern India in *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism* (Heehs, 1998). As a specialist in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal, he finds it convenient to view the problem from a particular historical vantage-point, exploring the links between religious nationalism, terrorism and communalism. At the same time he proposes an interdisciplinary framework in which communalism as a whole can be adequately described and understood. The present article might, in a way, be regarded as a belated review of *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*, which is eminently relevant even a decade after its publication. In another way, it is an off-shoot of the review of Heehs's latest biography *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (Heehs, 2008) presented elsewhere in this journal (Kvassay, 2009). Heehs writes about communalism in the biography as well as in *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*, but the bulk of his argument is to be found in the latter book.

The rise of communalism is often attributed to the "religious bias" of the leaders of the national movement. "Among Hindu leaders," writes Heehs, "those most often mentioned as proponents of religious nationalism are Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipinchandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghose, and Mohandas Gandhi."

Setting his focus on Bengal, Heehs traces the roots of religious nationalism in that region to two separate, yet intimately associated currents: cultural nationalism and Hindu religious revivalism. Both arose in Bengal in the 1870s and 1880s, and

> flowed together in the works of Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94), the foremost Bengali writer of the period.... In his preference of selfless work in the world to quietistic religion and in his confidence that a resurgent India could capture the cultural hegemony of the world, Bankimchandra was a forerunner of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the preeminent voice of Hindu revival in the nineties. *(Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism, p. 97)*

"Political (as opposed to cultural) nationalism first became dynamic during the agitation against the partition of Bengal." It is linked primarily with Bipinchandra Pal (1858-1932) — the first politician to propose "complete political autonomy as the goal of the national movement" — and Aurobindo Ghose. Both of them

> based their demand for independence on the inherent right of peoples to self-rule and the inherent evil of foreign domination. But both were deeply religious men and used religious terminology and symbols in some of their writings and speeches. These works are the primary texts of early twentieth-century Bengali religious nationalism....

> Their methods were derived largely from European political sources. Religion, however, was the inspiring and guiding force of their lives and they believed it should inspire and guide the movement as well. *(Ibid. p. 98)*

Heehs makes explicit certain broad "preconceptions" that underpinned their nationalism. The first notion — that any great change in India "had to have a religious basis and inspiration" — was "well established before Bipinchandra and Aurobindo began their work." Religious nationalists believed that this religious stress was necessary because of "the distinctive, spiritual nature of the Indian people and nation." This idea was popularised by Brahmo Samaj, comes out repeatedly in Vivekananda's speeches, and also was advanced by some European Orientalists. "Aurobindo took it for granted," says Heehs:

> Bipinchandra defended it with reference to nineteenth-century European theories of heredity and race. He held also that every nation had an essential nature, was 'the manifestation and revelation of a divine ideal.' Aurobindo spoke of this essential nature as the 'nation-soul' and believed, like Bipinchandra, that India's soul was preeminently spiritual. *(Ibid. p. 99)*

The next notion — "the superiority and universality of Indian religion" — follows naturally:

> It was the universal religion, or could serve as the basis of one.... Speaking to Western audiences, Vivekananda stressed that Hinduism was universal, since based on eternal principles; speaking to Indians, he referred to these same principles to show that 'ours is the only true religion.' Aurobindo favored an eclectic, basically Vedantic Hinduism, which he believed to be universal and 'the basis of the future world-religion.' But this 'wider Hinduism' was something that embraced 'Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these.' *(Ibid.)*

Bipinchandra too — though he favoured the Hindu Vaishnavism he was born into — emphasized that the true universal religion was "beyond all sectional and sectarian designations." "At the same time," stresses Heehs, "it was not 'the view-point of abstract universalism,' and could only be reached by following one's proper line of development and not by cutting oneself off from a 'particular culture, country, history, tradition, and scripture.'"

The last notion — that of India's spiritual mission — is a near-inevitable conclusion:

> As custodian of the spiritual tradition that held the key to the future progress of the world, India had a mission: to give this boon to the rest of humanity. India under foreign rule could not do this; India therefore had to be free. India thus sought independence not for itself but for the world. *(Ibid. p. 100)*

In Aurobindo's words, "the movement of which the first outbreak was political, will end in a spiritual consummation" and bring about "the spiritualization of the [human] race." By achieving this, India would fulfil its destiny and become the spiritual leader of humanity.

"On these often unseen spiritual foundations Aurobindo and Bipinchandra erected the structure of their politics. But their nationalism was 'religious' chiefly because they considered the Nationalist movement a 'religion,' that is, an endeavour whose para-

mount importance demanded dedication and sacrifice."

"Aurobindo's nationalism was religious in another sense as well," writes Heehs. "He sometimes used religious terms and symbols in speaking about it," drawing them mostly from the Hindu tradition,

> which he had embraced in his effort to renationalize himself after returning from England, where he had passed his childhood and youth. Aurobindo never defended his use of Hindu symbols. He had, after all, as much right to allude to the *Gita* or *Chandi* as Gladstone to the Bible or Homer. *(Ibid. p. 101)*

Bipinchandra used Hindu symbols "within the framework of his theory of composite nationality":

> In India, a land of many cultures, nation-building had to 'be conducted not along one single line, whether new or old, but along five main lines, Hindu, Parsee, Buddhist, Moslem and Christian.' Each of these great world cultures had

> "special characteristics of their own, which it would be worse than unwise to try to obliterate.... The Hindu nation-builder, therefore, shall not seek to superimpose his own ideals and methods on his Mohamedan brother, nor shall the Mohamedan, the Buddhist, or the Christian, seek to obliterate the essential characteristics of the Hindu culture and Hindu race." *(Ibid.)*

"Of the five groups making up Bipinchandra's composite nationality," writes Heehs, "only two, the Hindus and the Muslims, had a problematic relationship." "Before 1905 there was little open conflict between the two groups, who considered themselves culturally distinct. But there was a good deal of bad blood between them." "Muslims made up somewhat more than half the population of pre-partition Bengal. Most lived in the eastern districts and belonged to the rural poor." As such, they "had to put up with the oppressions of Hindu zamindars, moneylenders, and policemen." The British used it to their advantage:

> Toward the end of 1903, the government of Bengal announced its intention to transfer the eastern districts of the province to Assam for reasons of administrative efficiency.... As the plan developed, British bureaucrats observed that there would be political advantages to drawing the borderline through the heartland of the region....

> There was an immediate outcry in the affected districts of Bengal, generally for the wrong reasons. Bengalis objected to being lumped together with the Assamese, whom they considered their inferiors. Such an attitude, Aurobindo noted in an article, was just playing into the hands of the British. "It should plainly be the policy of the national movement to ignore points of division and to emphasise old and create new points of contact and union." The claimed benefits of the administrative restructuring were just a sop. The people of Bengal needed to be aware "that this measure is no mere administrative proposal but a blow straight at the heart of the nation." Aurobindo never completed or published the piece, but he did bring out an anti-partition pamphlet called *No Compromise*. *(The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, pp. 73–4)*

The government kept the subsequent talks in secret. In its final decision the political reasons — "to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule" — came to seem more pressing than the administrative ones:

> The "opponents" were educated Bengali-speaking Hindus, the most politically conscious group in India. After partition, they would be outnumbered in the remnants of Bengal by non-Bengalis, and in East Bengal by Bengali-speaking Muslims. Lord Curzon focused his attention on the latter group in his attempt to win support for the plan. In the new province "the Mohomedans of Eastern Bengal" would regain "a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Musalman Viceroys and Kings," he said. The East Bengal Muslims, originally as opposed as the Hindus to the proposal, were swayed by Curzon's blandishments. *(Ibid, pp. 82–3)*

In Summer 1905, when the newspapers reported the government's final decision, it "touched off an unprecedented reaction." "At dozens of meetings, thousands of people vowed to stop buying salt, sugar, cloth, or anything else made in Britain. Instead, they would buy only *swadeshi* (indigenous) products." For a while,

> The Bengali people were caught up in the sort of enthusiasm that often is felt in the early stages of revolutions…. This, of course, was not all there was to it. Along with feelings of self-sacrifice and solidarity came a surge of hatred, frustration, and rage, directed not only against the government, but also anyone who went against the dictates of the crowd. Bengalis attempting to buy British products were first requested, then pressured to desist. The use of violence, psychological and physical, was not far behind. *(Ibid. p. 83)*

It soon became apparent, continues Heehs, that the *swadeshi* movement

> was sustained primarily by a single social group: educated, middle-class, Bengali-speaking Hindus, whose interests would be hurt by partition. The peasantry, mostly uneducated Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, would be largely unaffected by the administrative restructuring, but would have to sacrifice the most to keep the movement alive. A laborer earning fifteen or twenty rupees a month was scarcely in a position to pay double for inferior cloth. Such considerations have prompted some historians to view the *swadeshi* movement as an attempt by the Hindu middle class to make the populace serve their political and economic interests. *(Ibid. pp. 83–4)*

"There is something to be said for such theories," admits Heehs, "but they do not give the whole story." In any case, the dividing line between *swadeshi* activists and the refractory soon turned communal: "When the boycott was not observed voluntarily, it was enforced by Hindu 'volunteers.' This sometimes led to clashes with people, many of them Muslims, who were not inclined to make a sacrifice for an abstraction that did not mean much to them."

"After the first days of enthusiasm," writes Heehs in *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism*, "few Muslims took part in the anti-partition movement. This embittered Hindu nationalists, who acted aggressively towards uncooperative Muslims. This was the immediate spark of the notorious East Bengal riots of 1907."

Meanwhile, in October 1906, Lord Minto received a deputation of influential Muslims. After hearing them out, the new Viceroy of India said:

> "You justly claim that your position should be estimated not merely on your numerical strength but in respect of the political importance of your community and the service it has rendered to the Empire." In this Minto was "entirely in accord with you." Faced with growing opposition from upper-class Hindus, the British were in need of "native" allies. One third of India's population was Muslim. Lagging behind the Hindus in education and

employment, the Muslims had come to understand that it was in their interest to establish a bloc to offset Hindu influence. In December 1906, two months after the Muslim deputation, the first meeting of the All-India Muslim League was held. Its stated aims were "to protect the cause and advance the interests our co-religionalists throughout the country" and "to controvert the growing influence of the so-called Indian National Congress." This declaration marked the beginning of sectarian politics in India. *(The Lives of Sri Aurobindo, p. 115)*

Even before the deputation, Bipinchandra Pal "and other congressmen, Extremist and Moderate, had made half-hearted attempts to woo Muslims. Calls for the two communities to stand together against their common adversary were routine, yet the gap between them grew." Aurobindo's initial response to the problem was "to ignore it." For Aurobindo, says Heehs,

> The one thing necessary was to popularize the gospel of national autonomy. To achieve this, the Extremists had first to outmaneuver the Moderates and capture the Congress. He believed that as the movement progressed, the Muslims would see that their interests were identical to the Hindus'. It soon would become impossible for anyone to maintain this complacent attitude. *(Ibid.)*

When Hindu–Muslim rioting broke out in East Bengal in 1907, Aurobindo blamed the British:

> The Muslims had not planned the attacks [he wrote in *Bande Mataram*], but had been goaded by the government. The Hindus retaliated only after "serious and even unbearable provocation." The violence was regrettable, but at least it showed that Hindus were developing "the habit of rising immediately and boldly to the height of even the greatest emergency." A hundred years later, the East Bengal riots are remembered not as occasions of Hindu self-assertion, but as early examples of the communal violence—to use a term that had not yet been invented—that continues to the present day. *(Ibid.)*

After the first session of the All-India Muslim League in Dacca,

> Bipinchandra and Aurobindo claimed to welcome the entry of Muslims in the political life of Bengal even if at first they were out of step with the national movement. Conflicts were important in public life, wrote Bipinchandra, since they 'contribute to the strength of the units in the earlier stages of social growth and consolidation.' But Bipinchandra, Aurobindo, and most other non-Muslim politicians opposed separate Muslim representation in the councils…. [as] Aurobindo wrote, 'not because we are opposed to a large Mahomedan influence in popular assemblies when they come but because we will be no party to a distinction which recognises Hindu and Mahomedan as permanently separate political units and thus precludes the growth of a single and indivisible Indian nation.' *(Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism, p. 102)*

Concerning the failure of Bengali religious nationalism to engage the Muslims, Heehs concedes that Bipinchandra and Aurobindo turned their attention to the Hindu-Muslim problem only when the conflict "threatened to disturb the united progress of the national movement." In fact, they "took no positive steps to include Muslims in the movement against British imperialism or in the Indian nationality that was being created in this crucible." They may have been right in opposing separate Muslim representation in the councils on the grounds that it "tended to divide the nascent nation,"

but they had no viable alternatives to offer. Aurobindo remained opposed to special concessions to Muslims even when more practical politicians realized that they were necessary. He considered two notable attempts to bind Muslims to the Congress movement, the Lucknow Pact of 1916, brokered by his Extremist ally B.G. Tilak, and the Bengal Pact of 1923, engineered by his former collaborator C.R. Das, to be serious errors. *(Ibid. pp. 114–5)*

In his most extensive treatment of the problem, Aurobindo wrote:

> Hindu-Mahomedan unity cannot be effected by political adjustments or Congress flatteries. It must be sought deeper down, in the heart and in the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought.… As a political question the Hindu-Mahomedan problem does not interest us at all, as a national problem it is of supreme importance. *(Ibid. p. 113)*

"That the root causes and cure of communalism are psychological," points out Heehs,

> is an important truth. That the question of communalism was without political interest at the beginning of [the twentieth] century was the greatest miscalculation made by proponents of Bengali religious nationalism. *(Ibid. p. 114)*

Many writers feel that the "Hindu tinge" in Bipinchandra's and Aurobindo's nationalism contributed to this failure. "The first critics of Bengali religious nationalism," begins Heehs his own analysis, "were members of the British bureucracy." While some thought that "Aurobindo's religious orientation made his utterances politically innocuous," most officials thought the opposite. Many believed that "Aurobindo's religiosity was opportunistic, simply a means to rouse the credulous masses." An influential report on "revolutionary crime" characterizes one of Aurobindo's pamphlets as "a remarkable instance of the perversion of religious ideals to political purposes." Others in the government considered his religious beliefs sincere. The British advocate general "came perhaps closest to the mark" by insisting that Aurobindo was indeed religious but that his "religion was … the expulsion of the English from India."

Moderate nationalists "were as put off by Aurobindo's religious fervour as the bureaucracy. So were many Extremist nationalists and revolutionaries, particularly those with left-wing leanings." Heehs notes the "remarkable convergence" of later "(neo-)colonialists and (neo-)Marxists" who stand "united in their condemnation of the mixture of religion and politics they find in Bipinchandra and Aurobindo." Both sets of writers "take for granted the separation of the political and religious spheres enjoined by post-Enlightenment European secularism" and share the notion that "any infusion of religious language into political discourse is illegitimate." As Heehs points out,

> The idea that religion ought to have nothing to do with politics is now so well established that writers can allude to the conventional wisdom that religious nationalism leads to communalism without offering either evidence or argument.

> Despite the endorsement of European secularism by many Western and Western-educated intellectuals, it is generally recognized that it is the outlook of an atypical minority in India.… Secularism as understood in India and as enshrined in the Indian Constitution is defined as an attitude of equal respect for all religions: *sarva dharmah samabhavah.…*

> Recently an increasing number of scholars, basing themselves in part on the Indian secularism of respect, have questioned the claim of European secularism to provide the framework for the debate on communalism. Differing widely in approach and orientation, these writers share a conviction that religion has a legitimate place in the public sphere and that European secularism may not be appropriate for India. *(Ibid. p. 105)*

In this context, Heehs mentions Louis Dumont's thesis that "the exclusion of religion as the basis of the nation is not an empirical but a normative affair," or a more recent work of T.N. Madan, Ashis Nandy and Richard Falk, which has demonstrated "the historical contingency of European secularism."

Heehs's further dealing with the complex topic of communalism — and his proposal for a more adequate interdisciplinary approach — would go beyond the scope of this article. I will limit myself to his analysis of "the gravest charge against religious nationalism": that it "led to the development of the contemporary Hindu right wing, whose communalistic stance is patent and whose encouragement of communal violence cannot seriously be doubted." In this connection, Heehs cites Prasenjit Duara who "begins his narrative of the rise of the Hindu Right with Vivekananda and Aurobindo" and presents Aurobindo "as an exponent of the orthodox Brahmanical tradition":

> Duara then links the religious nationalism of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Gandhi with the syndicated Hinduism of Dayananda Saraswati, V.D. Savarkar, and Tilak. This in turn he links with two leading organizations of the contemporary Hindu Right: the Vishwa Hindu Parisad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). *(Ibid. pp. 115-6)*

"Duara is too careful a historian to do more than suggest narrative linkages," admits Heehs. Others, however, are more outspoken. For instance, "the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, in a journalistic piece, finds statements of Aurobindo and Vivekananda indistinguishable from those of 'contemporary *Hindutva* spokesmen.' "

Heehs then investigates the origins of the term "Hindutva," currently "a label for the politics of exclusive Hindu identity, as exemplified by the BJP, VHP, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Shiv Sena." He explains that "the term goes back no further than the late nineteenth century" and literally means "Hinduness." Tilak used it in this sense when he claimed in 1902 that it was "the common factor" in Indian society, "since everywhere in India the majority of the people were Hindu." Tilak's second proposition was of course untrue, writes Heehs,

> unless Tilak was excluding areas where Hindus were not in the majority [such as Baluchistan, Sind, West Punjab, and East Bengal], in which case it was tautological. But his aim was not so much to exclude non-Hindus as to find a factor that could provide a basis of common nationality to people of all parts of the country. This was the cultural inheritance shared by all brought up as members of the Hindu religion.

> In taking up Hindutva as the central notion of Hindu politics, Savarkar detached it from religion. Hindutva was not, he said, reserved for 'believers in the dogmas and religious practices that go by the name "Hinduism." ' Himself not a believer in this sense, Savarkar was concerned 'not with any "ism" whatever but — with Hindutva alone in its national and cultural aspects.' It was necessary to define the 'essential implications of Hindutva' so that 'Hindus' could be counted for political purposes. *(Ibid. p. 116)*

Ultimately, Savarkar had to bring in the religious element — that of having a common 'Holyland' — even though he had begun by denying the centrality of religion. He did this "because he had to find a way to exclude Indian Muslims and Christians, whose 'Holylands' were outside India but who by birth and blood were as 'Hindu' as anyone else." During the 1940s, Savarkar's "Hindutva" was

> co-opted by M.S. Golwarkar, the leader of the RSS. This organization, which had no significant role in the freedom movement, is distinguished by a hostility towards non-Hindus that at its worst is tantamount to fascism. Non-Hindus in India, wrote Golwarkar, must 'adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of Hindu race and culture.' They must live 'wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment — not even citizen's rights.' Like Savarkar's Hindutva, Golwarkar's definition of the Hindu is political rather than religious but excludes those whose religion is not Hinduism. *(Ibid. p. 117)*

In spite of "numerous points of similarity" between the contemporary Hindu right wing and the freedom-movement-era religious nationalism, "similarities are superficial while the points of difference are deep":

> What is centrally important to Golwarkar and spokesmen of the contemporary Hindu Right is that India be recognized as a Hindu state. During the mid-1920s … the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim détente and demands for separate representation made it necessary to count Hindu heads — and as many as possible. This was the origin of the political or syndicated Hinduism of the Hindu Right. Savarkar and Golwarkar made this political creed sufficiently broad to include Hindus of all sects — even Sikhs and Jains — but sufficiently narrow to exclude Indian Muslims and Christians. *(Ibid. pp. 117–8)*

Bipinchandra and Aurobindo explicitly rejected syndicated Hinduism as a political device. "We do not understand Hindu nationalism as a possibility under modern conditions," wrote Aurobindo apropos of the formation of the Hindu Sabha: "Under modern conditions India can only exist as a whole." Aurobindo saw the interaction of Hindu and Muslim culture in India

> as an opportunity for the development of 'a greater spiritual principle and formation which could reconcile the two or a political patriotism surmounting the religious struggle and uniting the two communities.' Bipinchandra saw the interaction in terms of his notion of composite nationality: 'the Hindu must continue to be a Hindu … the Mahomedan must continue to be a Mahomedan' but both 'shall contribute their best and their highest to the common life of the nation.' Both Bipinchandra and Aurobindo considered Indian Muslims as much a part of the Indian nation as the Hindus. *(Ibid. p. 118)*

Those who believe that Sri Aurobindo turned more exclusively towards Hinduism in the later part of his life, might wish to consider his letter of November 1932 quoted in *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond* (Heehs, 2005):

> It is news to me that I have excluded Mahomedans from the Yoga. I have not done it any more than I have excluded Europeans or Christians. As for giving up one's past, if that means giving up the outer forms of the old religions, it is done as much by the Hindus here [in his Ashram in Pondicherry] as by the Mahomedans…. What is kept of Hinduism is Vedanta and Yoga in which Hinduism is one with Sufism of Islam and with the Christian mystics. But even here it is not Vedanta and Yoga in their traditional limits (their

past), but widened and rid of many ideas that are peculiar to the Hindus. If I have used Sanskrit terms and figures, it is because I know them and do not know Persian and Arabic. I have not the slightest objection to anyone here drawing inspiration from Islamic sources if they agree with the Truth as Sufism agrees with it. On the other hand I have not the slightest objection to Hinduism being broken to pieces and disappearing from the face of the earth, if that is Divine Will. I have no attachment to past forms; what is Truth will always remain; the Truth alone matters. *(Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond, pp. 354–5)*

This is then Heehs's final verdict; it applies to Sri Aurobindo not only as a politician, but also as a yogi and philosopher:

All that is central to the Hindu Right — religious syndicalism for political purposes, exclusive Hinduness, rejection of non-Hindus — was absent from the freedom-movement-era religious nationalism of Bengal and elsewhere. To assert in spite of this that the Hindu Right descends directly from Bengali religious nationalism because some general notions of the RSS-VHP-BJP combine are found in the thought of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and others is to commit the genetic fallacy. Golwarkar is no more the direct descendent of Vivekananda than Mussolini is of Mazzini or [in Russia] Zhirinovsky of Khomyakov. *(Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism; p. 118)*

References:

Heehs, P (1998). *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Heehs, P (2005). *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond.* Delhi: Permanent Black.

Heehs, P (2008). *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Kvassay, M (2009). A Discerning Tribute (Review of Heehs: The Lives of Sri Aurobindo). *AntiMatters* 3 (1) 117–136. ⤤

Marcel Kvassay, a graduate of Slovak Technical University in Bratislava, worked for Oxford University Press in the area of English Language Teaching, and for Alcatel as a trainer and a software development methodologist. He spent several years in Puducherry, India, most of the time working at SABDA, a book distribution unit of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department.