

Rue Romain Rolland

Introduction

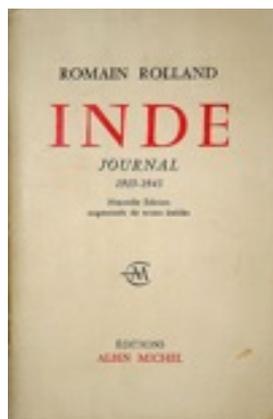
As N. Ram, Editor in Chief at The Hindu wrote in 2011 « You've got to be a fairly sophisticated tourist to engage meaningfully with the modern heritage of South India. It is rich, many shaped and multi-hued; endowed with enough monuments but not monumental; and presents itself as an inexhaustible store of small things, including the most interesting people drawn from day to day life, past and present, features of rural South India that have over ten decades become part of urban sprawl, and aspects of social life that don't quite fit into the conventional wisdom on metropolitan life. »

N. Ram Esq. was referring to Madras, but we are going to embark on a smaller journey, discovering the life and times of one street in the old French Quarter in Pondicherry, rue Romain Rolland.



For some years now, every time I return to Pondicherry and Gratitude the first thing I do is to set off down rue Romain Rolland to explore old haunts. And for some long time I have been curious as to who the man really was and how and why he had both a street and a library named after him. And, as is so often the way when visiting dear old Pondy, the questions continued to hover without my really ever « engaging meaningfully » with the modern heritage of South India!

And this parlous state of affairs might have continued indefinitely if I hadn't come across the following 1962 edition of Rolland's « Inde Journal 1915-1943 », in a second bookshop in Paris.



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Twelve Euros bought me an introduction, if not the key, to Rolland's fascinating involvement with leading Indian figures of the twentieth century.



Romain Rolland in 1939

A quick search on the internet also revealed that the local library, « Bibliothèque Publique », was renamed the Romain Rolland Library in 1966 to mark the birth centenary of the 'great French scholar'. (Refer: http://art.puducherry.gov.in/romain_library.html)

Rue des Capucins became rue Romain Rolland in the same year. The library was still situated on the eponymous street until it was shifted to its present location at N°3 Rangapillai Street in 1974. http://www.ifpindia.org/digitaldb/site/pondicherry/data/part_2_introduction.html.

In a series of occasional articles I propose to investigate and share my findings about both the history of the street in Pondicherry and the Frenchman who apparently never learnt English and never visited India but whose name still resonates in this small Union Territory in South East India.