

Rue Romain Rolland

Part 2

Romain Rolland and his India Awakening

In 1915 Rolland received the Nobel Prize for literature and had not yet focussed on the continents of India and Asia. In his universally acclaimed epic trilogy, « Jean Christophe », Rolland had been focussing on German and French brotherhood and studying the work of Tolstoy and other European and Russian authors.



Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

This was all to change when Rolland received an essay from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, entitled « A world policy for India », which had been printed in Dec, 1914 .



Coomaraswamy hoped for a spiritual and aesthetic marriage between the East and the West. For him the meeting of minds was based on the spiritual contact between deep mysteries of truth in the cultures of East and West. This resonated profoundly with Rolland, who assigned himself the role of a sort of archway linking together the minds of men and women of people and races and particularly between Asia and Europe.

In less than ten years Rolland became a friend and host to such imminent Indian intellectuals as Gandhi, Tagore, Sir Jagadis Chunder Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prof. Mahalanobis, Dilip Kumar Roy, Swami Ashokananda and K.T.Paul to name but a few and the doors to the Villa Olga in Villeneuve Switzerland were always open to them.

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Dilip Kumar Roy

According to his diary, Rolland first met Dilip Kumar Roy, who later joined Sri Aurobindo and the Mother at the Ashram in Pondicherry before going on to found his own ashram in Pune.



23 August 1920 (Paris)

A young Bengali Hindu, D.K. Roy, comes to see me ... He tells us about Gandhi who has an extraordinary influence over the Hindus. he is a Madras (SIC) lawyer who gave up all of his property 7 or 8 years ago to devote himself entirely to the salvation of his people on whom he has a magnetic effect. He preaches passive resistance to them and turns them away from violence. The great revolt of last year broke out after the British removed him from the scene. He is at present in Delhi. He seems to have been influenced by Tolstoy's ideas.

Dilip K. Roy continued to visit and correspond with Rolland for many years after, often relaying information about Gandhi and Tagore whilst also keeping Rolland informed about Pondicherry.

Rolland soon applied himself to studying and then writing about Gandhi and his great Swadeshi movement and was drawn to Tagore as a fellow spirit.

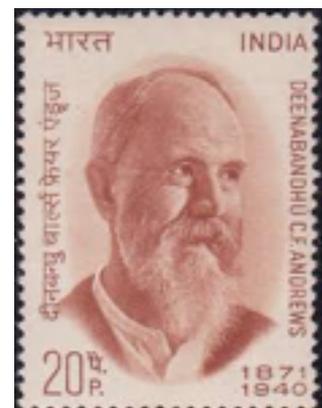
Rolland to Kalidas Nag

Thursday, 28 December 1922

... My sister and I are reading - or rather have just finished - the 700 or 800 pages Gandhi has published. Some of the things he says are immortal, others are highly perishable and threaten the rest of the system: above all this medieval mistrust of modern science, which seems to him fundamentally diabolical, as it did to Tolstoy. The scientists maybe. But as for science itself, Tolstoy and Gandhi don't see that it's the living spirit of God

April 1923 (London)

Visited by Andrews, the friend of Tagore and Gandhi, who's testimony was so useful to me in my study on Gandhi. he has lived in india for twenty years. In 1903-1904 he was sent by India to the Transvaal in Support of Gandhi, who at that time was in prison; he shared his life and his ordeals, and by his wisdom and skill contributed a great deal to the happy reconciliation in 1914 between Gandhi and the Government of the Union of South



Africa ... He is the link between Tagore, and Gandhi and he teaches at Santiniketan.

... Andrews was the only witness at the discussion between Tagore and Gandhi, shortly after Tagore's turn to India. He describes them as two types of two opposing Indian races; Gandhi, from western India, is of an unimaginative and very practical race; Tagore is quite the

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opposite <http://ramachandraguha.in/archives/traveling-with-tagore-penguin-classics.html>.
The first subject of discussion was idols; Gandhi defended them, believing the masses



incapable of raising themselves immediately to abstract ideas. Tagore cannot bear to see the people eternally treated as a child. Gandhi quoted the great things achieved in Europe by the flag as idol; Tagore found it easy to object, but Gandhi held his ground, contrasting European flags bearing eagles, etc., with his own, on which he has put a spinning wheel. The second point was nationalism, which Gandhi defended. He said that one must go through nationalism to reach internationalism - in the same way that one must go through war to reach peace. (A terrifying argument!) This is why he has so often worked to recruit for the

English armies. Andrews wrote him letter after letter to dissuade him, but Gandhi never gave in.

Andrews approves of my comparison of Gandhi with St Paul and Tagore with Plato. he says smilingly that Gandhi is very much St Paul.

Two Literary Nobel Prize Winners - A Meeting of Minds

In France, Rabindranath Tagore forged a great friendship with Romain Rolland, who helped translate and disseminate his works. The spiritual and intellectual affinities between the two ran deep.

Rabindranath Tagore: "Patriotism cannot be our final shelter. My refuge is humanity."

Romain Rolland« The union of Europe and Asia must be, in the centuries to come, the most noble task of mankind. As for myself, India, from now on is not a foreign land.

She is the greatest of all countries, the ancient country from which once I came I find her again deep inside me. »



Rolland was later disturbed by Tagore's uncritical view of Mussolini, but the two continued to correspond for many years.

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Rolland's work on Vivekenanda was a direct response to Ra bindranath Tagore who had told him, "If you want to know India, study Vivekananda. In him everything is positive and nothing negative". Rolland wrote, "His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Händel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books, at thirty years' distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports, must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!"

<https://aknandy.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/influence-legacy-of-swamy-vivekananda/>

Mahatma Gandhi

As a literary and philosophical giant of the twentieth century, Romain Rolland played an enormous part in supporting Gandhi and Indian Independence. From an intellectual as well as a spiritual stand point he, Rolland, was against violence and I shall examine the extensive correspondence with Gandhi in a separate article.

« Romain Rolland's critique of imperialism emphasised that Europe's destructive tendencies, so visible during the Great War, were active in the colonised regions of Asia and Africa. The civilising rhetoric of imperialism veiled nationalistic and expansionistic aims, the will to amass wealth and to subjugate weaker societies. "Under the mask of civilisation, or of a brutal national idealism, the politics of the great States methodically practice fraud and violence, theft and degradation (rather, extermination) of the so-called inferior peoples. » Throughout the interwar period, he protested European imperialism and predicted that the awakening nations would turn this violence against the Europeans themselves. Imperialistic aggressors would inevitably be confronted with anti-imperialistic aggression, which might finally engulf Europe. If this happened, Europeans were ultimately responsible. Romain Rolland sought some intermediary between the imperialistic and anti-imperialistic forces, between East and West. Progressive intellectuals of Europe and developing countries might be able to "use their hearts and geniuses" to work toward nonviolent solutions to imperialistic injustices. Because struggles for national liberation might unchain cataclysmic forces, he urged intellectuals to preserve an "Island of Calm," to not be swept away by the destructive passions.

Source: <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft538nb2x9&chunk.id=doe2660&toc.depth=1&brand=ucpress>

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Here is Rolland's description of Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Switzerland in 1931.
Printed in 'The Nation'.

A visit with the 'king of India.'



Villeneuve, Switzerland, December, 1931

How I should have liked to have you here during the visit of the Indians! They stayed five days—from Sunday night until Friday afternoon, the eleventh—at the Villa Lionette. The little man, bespectacled and toothless, was wrapped in his white burnoose, but his legs, thin as a heron's stilts, were bare. His shaven head with its few coarse hairs was uncovered and wet with rain. He came to me with a dry laugh, his mouth open, like a good dog panting, and flinging an arm around me leaned his cheek against my shoulder. I felt his grizzled head against my cheek. It was, I amuse myself thinking, the kiss of St. Dominic and St. Francis.

Then came Mira [Miss Slade], proud of figure and with the stately bearing of a Demeter, and finally three Indians, one a young son of Gandhi, Devidas, with a round and happy face. He is gentle, and but little aware of the grandeur of his name. The others were secretaries—disciples—two young men of rare qualities of heart and mind: Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal.

As I had contrived shortly beforehand to get a severe cold on my chest, it was to my house and to the chamber on the second floor where I sleep at Villa Olga—you will remember it—that Gandhi came each morning for long conversations. My sister interpreted, with the assistance of Mira, and I had also a Russian friend and secretary, Miss Kondacheff, who took notes on our discussions. Some good photographs by Schlemmer, our neighbor from Montreux, recorded the aspect of our interviews.

Evenings, at seven o'clock, prayers were held in the first-floor salon. With lights lowered, the Indians seated on the carpet, and a little assembly of the faithful grouped about, there was a suite of three beautiful chants—the first an extract from the Gita, the second an ancient hymn on the Sanskrit texts which Gandhi has translated, and the third a canticle of Rama and Siva, intoned by the warm, grave voice of Mira.

Gandhi held other prayers at three o'clock in the morning, for which, in London, he used to wake his harassed staff, although he had not retired until one. This little man, so frail in appearance, is tireless, and fatigue is a word which does not exist in his vocabulary. He could calmly answer for hours the heckling of a crowd, as he did at Lausanne and Geneva, without a muscle of his face twitching: Seated a table, motionless, his voice always clear and calm, he replied to his adversaries open or masked—and they were not lacking at Geneva—giving them rude truths which left them silenced and suffocated.

The Roman bourgeoisie, militarist and nationalist, who had at first received him with crafty looks, quivered with rage when he left. I believe that if his stay had lasted any longer the

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public meetings would have been forbidden. He pronounced himself as unequivocally as possible on the double question of national armaments and the conflict between capital and labor. I was largely responsible for steering him on this latter course.

His mind proceeds through successive experiments into action and he follows a straight line, but he never stops, and one would risk error in attempting to judge him by what he said ten years ago, because his thought is in constant evolution. I will give you a little example of it that is characteristic.

He was asked at Lausanne to define what he understood by God. He explained how, among the noblest attributes which the Hindu scriptures ascribed to God, he had in his youth chosen the word "truth" as most truly defining the essential element. He had then said, "God is Truth." "But," he added, "two years ago I advanced another step. I now say, 'Truth is God.' For even the atheists do not doubt the necessity for the power of truth. In their passion for discovering the truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the existence of God, and, from their point of view, they are right." You will understand from this single trait the boldness and independence of this religious spirit from the Orient. I noted in him traits similar to Vivikananda.

And yet not a single political ruse catches him unprepared. And his own politics are to say everything that he thinks to everybody, not concealing a thing.

On the last evening, after the prayers, Gandhi asked me to play him a little of Beethoven. (He does not know Beethoven, but he knows that Beethoven has been the intermediary between Mira and me,* and consequently between Mira and himself, and that, in the final count, it is to Beethoven that the gratitude of us all must go.) I played him the Andante of the Fifth Symphony. To that I added "Les Champs Elysées" of Gluck—the page for the orchestra and the air for the flute.

He is very sensitive to the religious chants of his country, which somewhat resemble the most beautiful of our Gregorian melodies, and he has worked to assemble them. We also exchanged our ideas on art, from which he does not separate his conception of truth, nor from his conception of truth that of joy, which he thinks truth should bring. But it follows of itself that for this heroic nature joy does not come without effort, nor even life itself without hardship. "The seeker after truth hath a heart tender as the lotus, and hard as granite."

Here, my dear friend, are a few hints of those days of ours together on which I have taken much more detailed notes. What I do not dwell on to you is the hurricane of intruders, loiterers, and half-wits which this visit loosed on our two villas. No, – the telephone never ceased ringing; photographers in ambuscades let fly their fusillades from behind every bush. The milkmen's syndicate at Lemane informed me that during all the time of this sojourn with me of the "King of India" they intended to assume complete responsibility for his "victualling." We received letters from "Sods of God." Some Italians wrote to the Mahatma beseeching him to indicate for them the ten lucky numbers for the next drawing of the weekly national lottery!

My sister, having survived, has gone to take ten days' rest at a cure in Zurich. She returns tomorrow. For my part, I have entirely lost the gift of sleep. If you find it, send it to me by registered mail!

Source: <https://www.thenation.com/article/mahatma-gandhi-meets-romain-rolland/>

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The Unsung Heroine

Rolland's philosophical correspondence probed into the nature of man, the creative process and the place of the socially responsible citizen in the modern world along with an inner life of reflection. A linguistic challenge of epic proportions. Unable to speak or read in English, he relied totally upon his sister, Madeleine who translated all missives, books, journals etc for him and served as interpreter for many long discussions at Villa Olga. No wonder she removed herself to take a cure after certain epic visits!

To be continued ...

Further Links

Romain Rolland: <http://www.recim.org/bio/rolland-an.htm>

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/07/07/declaration-of-the-independence-of-the-mind-romain-rolland/>

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: <https://thuppahi.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/in-appreciation-of-ananda-kentish-coomaraswamy1877-1947/>

Mahatma Gandhi: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/RomainRolland.htm>

Dilip Kumar Roy: https://www.aurobindo.ru/persons/00078_e.htm

Rabinranath Tagore: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-article.html

C.F. Andrews: [https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ZpkyDQAAQBAJ&pg=PT34&lpg=PT34&dq=romain+rolland+April+1923+\(London\)Visited+by+Andrews,+the+friend+of+Tagore+and+Gandhi,+&source=bl&ots=L1e7cPaZO4&sig=nHNpYuOrkCT0PjYZCluRFuHaGRE&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiw3qK06rnUAhXENo8KHVNTAjwQ6AEIJTAA#v=onepage&q=romain%20rolland%20April%201923%20\(London\)Visited%20by%20Andrews%2C%20the%20friend%20of%20Tagore%20and%20Gandhi%2C&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ZpkyDQAAQBAJ&pg=PT34&lpg=PT34&dq=romain+rolland+April+1923+(London)Visited+by+Andrews,+the+friend+of+Tagore+and+Gandhi,+&source=bl&ots=L1e7cPaZO4&sig=nHNpYuOrkCT0PjYZCluRFuHaGRE&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiw3qK06rnUAhXENo8KHVNTAjwQ6AEIJTAA#v=onepage&q=romain%20rolland%20April%201923%20(London)Visited%20by%20Andrews%2C%20the%20friend%20of%20Tagore%20and%20Gandhi%2C&f=false)

Kalidas Nag on Tagore: http://ignca.nic.in/ks_40030.htm

K.T. Paul: <http://www.indianymca.org/our-history/>

Transcription of letter 183 - copy of letter from RR to Mira, November 1931: https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ZpkyDQAAQBAJ&pg=PT17&lpg=PT17&dq=gandhi+%26+romain+rolland&source=bl&ots=L1e89RhUK4&sig=fbI242WNlqZwoiR2jZspv74-Ng&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiCwOHL_M7UAhXIOI8KHf0zAM04ChDoAQhqMAk#v=onepage&q=gandhi%20%26%20romain%20rolland&f=false

Film

<http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/the-lighthouse-the-ocean-and-the-sea-talks-about-tagore-romain-rolland-and-kalidas-nag-writes-ranjan-das-gupta/article6360868.ece>

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Some of Romain Rolland's Oeuvres

