

M.K.Gandhi through Western  
Lenses: Romain Rolland's  
Mahatma Gandhi: *The Man  
Who Became One With the  
Universal Being*

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**Abstract:**

Gandhi, an Orientalist could find a sublime place in the heart and history of the Westerners with the literary initiative of a French Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland. Rolland was a French writer, art historian and mystic who bagged Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. Rolland's pioneering biography (in the West) on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi published in 1924, not only made him popular overnight but also restructured the Indian figure in the minds of people. Since the publication of his biography, number of biographies on Gandhi appeared in the market from various corners of the world. Rolland himself being a pacifist was impressed with Gandhi, a man with different life style and unique modus operandi. Pacifism has greatly benefited from the biographical and historiographical revival by contribution of such great authors. Gandhi's firm belief in the democratic and four fundamental principles of Truth (Satya), non-violence (Ahimsa), welfare of all (Sarvodaya) and peaceful protest (Satyagraha) left an indelible impact on the writer which helped him to express his resentment at imperialism in his later works. The paper would attempt to reassess Gandhi as a philosopher, and revolutionary in the context with Romain Rolland's correspondence with Gandhi written in 1923-24. The paper will be a sincere effort to explore Rolland's first but lasting impression of Gandhi who offered attractive regenerative possibilities for Europe after the great war.

**Keywords:** Oriental, imperialism, Historiography, biography, Sarvodaya, Satyagraha, Pacifism.

Indian political psychologist, social theorist, and critic Ashis Nandy in his *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (1983) says that “All interpretations of India are ultimately autobiographical” (80). There are several readings of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, including every dimension of his personality. From Joseph J. Doke, a Christian missionary in South Africa who wrote first biography of Gandhi in 1909, there are several incisive readings and inquiries into his life from various perspectives and philosophical standpoints. Gandhi’s personal image that led to the titles of Mahatma, Bapu, father of the nation, half-naked fakir, and the like; his political life and leadership that played a major role in India’s independence from British rule. In the existing literature on Gandhi, there is a prevalent sense that most of these elements are necessary for understanding Gandhi. It is no wonder, then, that much of the prominent contemporary literature on the phenomenon of Gandhi continues to be largely anecdotal, historical, and biographical in character

Romain Rolland (1866 –1944), a French writer, art historian and mystic was a recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. Rolland, who had a pacifist bent of mind, was a great admirer of Gandhi. Influenced by Gandhi’s philosophy of non-violence, his ideology and political acumen, he wrote a book on Gandhi in 1924 without ever having met him. The book turned out to be crucial for both Rolland himself and for Gandhi’s reputation in Europe. Rolland happened to personally meet M.K Gandhi in 1931 when the latter was in London for the Round Table Conference. Throughout his life Rolland maintained his interest in India and Indian spirituality. Rolland is also the first to clear a kind of reconciliation between Gandhi and Indian Communists which was otherwise doubted by many thinkers and philosophers. He exhibits his impact of Stalin and Lenin while analyzing Gandhi through his biography. He accepts in his letter (Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence) to Surendranath Tagore in 1933, that it is the need of the hour to combine Gandhian philosophy and Lenin’s communism for the betterment of the society, so that the two may come together at this hour to overthrow the old world and found a new order.

Rolland expressed his desire of approximating two personalities together several times during his writings in the same communication he observes a planned non-violence and well-organized radical violence should be associated armies.

Coordination of the both should act against the common foes of humanity, such as war, totalitarianism, imperialism etc. Rolland, the visionary, must have had felt the need of bringing two ideologies together with view of protecting weaker section of the society. And it was the philosophy of combining two extreme opposite forces of non-violence (Ahimsa) and violence for bringing positive results in the society. That way Rolland was trying to incorporate new order into the old one. Rolland had first heard of Gandhi through his friend D.K. Roy who mentioned Gandhi as a 'magnetic lawyer' who was influenced by Tolstoy in his diary on 23rd August 1920. It was also written that Gandhi "...preaches passive resistance to them and turns them away from violence" (Rolland, 3). Rolland had believed that non-resistance would be detrimental to his own nation, given the the politically unstable climate of Europe then. He argued in favour of pacifism since Europe was then moving into a stage of great insecurity. His work was a cudgel against fascism, and the passivity of the Vichy government. Rolland describes Gandhi in his book *Romain Rolland and Gandhi correspondence: Letters, diary extracts, articles, etc* (1975) as follow:

Gandhi, is small, insignificant-looking, except when he begins to speak, and of unruffled patience. There is nothing severe in his manners; he laughs like a child and adores children. His asceticism is extreme...Gandhi's principle is that life is a preparation for suffering martyrdom and death, and the results he has obtained in Bengal are surprising. (13)

Rolland writes that his book on Gandhi ruffled feathers of the Orientalists who have been fretting that someone outsider to their circle has something to say. However, Gandhi approved and appreciated Rolland's perspective on his life and work. Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's associate, quotes Gandhi as he writes: "Romain Rolland is at this point not only a poet he is a seer with the vision of the truth" (ibid18).

Before Rolland promoted Gandhi by mixing anti-imperialism, the pacific ideology, and the saintliness of his life—Gandhi was merely an Indian lawyer, known in Europe or America. Rolland's critique of expansionism and Europe's destructive propensities during the Great War, and in the colonized regions of Asia and

Africa was an ambitious task. Rolland writes: "Under the mask of civilization, 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 (Fisher 15). Throughout the period of war, Rolland protested Europe's imperialism. He predicted that Europe's imperialistic aggression would be confronted with the anti-imperialistic antagonism. Rolland recommended the intermediary between the imperialistic and anti-imperialistic forces of East and West. Progressive intellectuals of Europe and developing countries may have a dialogue using their hearts and geniuses to work towards amicable and peaceful solutions to imperialistic perpetration. Gandhi's political ideology offered one humane solution to the development of imperialist and anti-imperialist aggression. The Gandhian path moved toward international cooperation, redress of the grievances of colonized nations, and a negotiating mechanism to satisfy the mutual needs of the imperialist powers and the countries seeking liberation. Rolland's anti-imperialism was thoroughly Gandhian. His condemnation of imperialism was often harsh but the remedies he suggested always left the possibilities open for negotiation between East and West. Rolland's intention was to bypass the massive disturbances and random violence of struggles of national liberation and the efforts to suppress them. The real work of forming a durable society could begin only after the struggles subsided.

Rolland was fully aware of the different ways of Gandhi and the Communists but he thought that it is the only way of bringing change in Indian society. He knows the enmity and abhorrence of the communists for Gandhi which he recounts too in his diary in Jan. 1928 that the Moscow communists or those who follow their line are showing two faces. On the one hand they treat Gandhi as an enemy and proclaim the bankruptcy of non-violence in India, on the other they disguise Gandhi as a Bolshevik and put about unlikely rumors of an imminent visit to Moscow. He believes that the concept of exploitation free society can only be realized by the acceptance of communist violence in Indian context and therefore he stresses on the need of unifying Gandhian ideology and communist philosophy for the establishment of utopian society in the country like India.

The Marxist and Leninist theoreticians raise their eye-brows on the flexible attitude of Rolland towards communist violence and Gandhian non-violence as

they believe that the world history records major changes in society have often brought with violent activities and not by non-violent means. Hiren Mukherjee in his book *Gandhi: A Study* observes,

“It would be so much more welcome if non-violence could work, but historical change, of the basic sort especially, does not come as wish-fulfillment, however ardent and largely shared that wish might be. More often than not, if history is our guide, such change involves violence. (34)

He, therefore, requested Gandhi to add up communist violence to his ideology of non-violence so that the results will come quick and permanent. Stating number of examples of the past he tried to convince Gandhi that the European people, like that of majority of Indians, are not of religious mentality to follow the path of non-violence and non-co-operation rather they believe in bravery a sort of violence in almost everything. Therefore, he thought that Gandhi cannot force to follow non-violence against the wishes of the people, he only can be pursuant in convincing them. To quote him from his book *Romain Rolland Gandhi Correspondence* in this regard:

The violence of the Communists in Russia was due to the armed intervention of great powers and he also refused to label Russian Communist ideology as materialist, since it had given rise to the most heroic of sacrifices, even though it did not imply non-violence. (170)

For Gandhi ‘Swaraj’ in itself was not an end. ‘Hind Swaraj’ (1909) was a book written by Gandhi during his return from England, after discussing with the British liberal intellectuals and Indian freedom fighters operating from London with radical means. He expressed the idea of ‘Swaraj’ in his afore-stated book. For Gandhi ‘Swaraj’ is a mental state, not physical or political emancipation from England. He believed that if Indians have to nurse the materialistic goals of the Western Civilization, modes of production and production relations for the sake of independence, then there is no reason for political independence in the first place. He states that such independence can be attained even under the British regime.

Gandhi hailed from an orthodox Hindu family and hence entailed the philosophical roots of the religion he belonged to. He devoutly followed these tenets in his own behavior. However, as a mass leader, he had to tone down his principles a bit for the sake of his followers. He was often titled 'a saint and a politician,' but there was nothing scriptural or otherworldly about his main political ethics. He mainly learned this not from religion, but from observing his father Karamchand Uttamchand Gandhi in his work as Diwan of Porbandar, Rajkot, and Wankaner. Famous Indian writer Munshi Premchand shares striking similarity with Mahatma Gandhi especially on the grounds of their humanism. Both Gandhi and Premchand have had high ideals in their life. Their precept of love for truth and simple living, back to villages, co-operation in place of class-struggle, communal harmony, sympathy for the Dalit, gender equality, fearlessness, morality, non-violent non-co-operation is common. Both are against the formula 'Art for art's sake'. Gandhi and Premchand tried to this from the perspectives of the common man and tried to think as he thought, shared his feeling, in key with his hopes, fears, dreams and aspirations. Both in all their thoughts and emotions, their identity, their oneness with the common man was complete. Both Gandhi and Premchand were the models of the masses of India. Perhaps this is the key of their immense appeal.

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by Henry David Thoreau's preaching about non-violent resistance. To resist things that were wrong, to resist immoral government action by simply refusing to cooperate was Gandhian way based on Thoreau's ideology. Thoreau's thoughts in developing his concept of Satyagraha (non-cooperation), or Truth Force was also adopted by Gandhi. Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King adapted Gandhi's idea of civil disobedience to the civil rights movement in the United States. Martin Luther King drew inspiration from Gandhi's preaching of non-violence. King was inspired by the teachings and philosophy of the Mahatma. United States has a number of statues, busts and memorials of Mahatma Gandhi. According to Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi was the first person in the world to elevate the love ethic of Jesus beyond just interaction between individuals to a massive social force. While describing his interpretation of the nonviolence that seeks to win over an adversary to friendship, rather than to demean or defeat him. King asserts that he developed the method for his social reform keeping Gandhian principles as model. King says when he visited India in 1959 that he might go other countries as a tourist but to India he goes as a pilgrim.

Throughout his correspondence with Gandhi he never thought that Gandhi for second also moved from his firm stand of non-violence. He was stubborn and firm for his ideology of non-violence; he convinced Rolland in turn that his method of non-violence is more permanent and enduring than the violent means of the communists. His various explanations to convince Gandhi to his point of view proved futile as he mentions at one point in his correspondence that “there are many things in the universe which I am forced to accept without approving them - starting perhaps with life itself, since destiny forces us to live by killing other forms of life” (443).

Conclusively, Rolland brings to the notice of the communists that Gandhi was a very stubborn person, a shrewd political activist who was always confirm about his views and ideas and was always ready to experiment things to the test of truth. While talking about Gandhi’s views on modern technology Rolland writes:

Gandhi... in no way condemns machinery and industrial techniques, in so far as they bring help and relief to humanity, his quarrel is merely with their murderous excesses and the morbid myth of economic over-production. When you look at India, you find a very special situation (Rolland 459-60).

Political philosophy of Gandhi seems to be the only solution to the imperialism and imperialist aggression of interwar period in East and West. He genuinely feels that that the democratic and conciliatory ways of fighting were more suitable for Soviet model. He, therefore, propagates the philosophy of non-violence as the only way to break the iron net of imperialism. Gandhian way is a way of co-operation, redressing agonies of the colonized nations and facilitating a dialogue to cater to their mutual needs of the imperialist powers and countries seeking liberation. Rolland seems to fail on all grounds in convincing him for armed resistance for bringing change in the situation. Through his correspondence with Gandhi in the book, Rolland seems neither convincible of communism nor disapproves non-violence of Gandhi completely. Finally, Rolland comes to conclusion that the ideas and philosophy of Gandhi is long contemplated and time tested not to be changed by anything because Gandhi shows great belief in bringing about economic equality by the means of non-violence.



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