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An Appraisal of Romain Rolland's views on Gandhi and Gandhism

Abstract

The present paper aims to analyse Romain Rolland's views on Gandhi and Gandhism. The work chosen here is Romain Rolland's book on Gandhi titled as "Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One With the Universal Being". This book is an impassioned defence of Gandhi and Gandhism at a time when they were being derided as out-played in the West. The appraisal and assessment of Gandhi's ideals of truth and non-violence and of the strategy of passive-resistance against the mighty British empire is of particular interest as it comes from a brilliant mind of the materialist-oriented West. Romain Rolland is the one who goes beyond the binaries and presents his views on Gandhi without the imperialistic gaze. Even though he had immersed himself in India, we still get an outsider's view of the inside, of the cross-cultural understanding. In the paper, the researcher will attempt to cite a place for Romain Rolland's defence of Gandhism.

Key Words: Outsider, Gandhism, Non-violence, Passive-resistance, Imperialistic

Introduction

“When I think of Gandhi, I think of Jesus Christ. He lives his life; he speaks his word; he suffers, strives and will someday nobly die, for his kingdom upon earth.” (Holmes, 620)

This image of Gandhi was immortalized in Western culture by Romain Rolland's book *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924), which in its English translation carried the subtitle “The Man who Became One With the Universal Being”. Romain Rolland was a highly respected public intellectual and a French writer who had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1915. In this book, he gives a very frank commentary on Gandhi and his ideals. As a great European and contemporary of the Mahatma, his views have a special value.

Romain Rolland's Views on Gandhi and Gandhism:

Romain Rolland was one of the Gandhi's first and most effective European popularisers. He first heard of Gandhi in 1920. Already during the war, he had become attracted to Indian culture when he was seeking new ways out of the dire situation in which European civilization found itself. In the immediate post-war years, he became friendly with Rabindranath Tagore and the musician Dilip Kumar Roy. Tagore and Roy both spoke to him of Gandhi and Rolland was stimulated to write a short biography, though they became friends after Rolland published his biography of Gandhi. While expressing his admiration for Gandhi, he talks about Gandhi's approach to religion, politics and his readiness to sacrifice everything for the sake of truth.

Gandhi's Ethical Approach to Religion:

Gandhi met various people to whom he owes to set his future mission in life. He was influenced by two men in particular. One of them is the Parsee Dadabhai and the other Professor Gokhale. It was Dadabhai who gave him the first real lesson in Ahimsa by teaching

him to apply heroic passivity to public life by fighting evil, not by evil, but by love. In other words, Gandhi is religious by nature and his doctrine is essentially religious. Gandhi believes in the religion of his people, in Hinduism but he is not blind believer accepting unquestionably all the traditions of his religions. His religion must satisfy his reason and correspond to the dictates of his conscience. He also realized that for him salvation could lie only in Hinduism but the important point is that he does not look upon Hinduism as the only religion. His conception of Hinduism includes these points: i) He believes in Avatars and rebirth, ii) He believes in *Varnashram Dharma*, or the discipline of the castes, iii) He believes in the protection of the cow in a much larger sense than the popular iv) He does not believe in idol worship.

When he was asked by an English clergyman about the book that had influenced him the most, Gandhi replied, "The New Testament". Gandhi also says that Tolstoi's ideal that the kingdom of God is within us helped him mould own faith into a real doctrine. It should not be forgotten that this Asiatic believer has translated Ruskin and Plato and quotes Thoreau, admires Mazzini, reads Edward Carpenter. In short, he is familiar with the best that Europe and America have produced. Thus, Gandhi's religion is essentially a universal religion, devoid of customs, superstitions and irrational giving. For him, truth and non-violence were the ultimate forms of unity of mankind. He denied being as 'saint', 'yogi' or 'ascetic' and described himself as a seeker of truth, the ultimate eternal truth.

Gandhi's Approach to Caste System:

Gandhi's belief in the caste system is almost more difficult for a European or Western Mind to understand. Romain Rolland writes,

“I would like to make it clear that Gandhi’s conception of the caste system is different from what we usually mean by that term, since he does not base it on pride or vain notions of social superiority, but on duties.” (25)

Gandhi believes in four classes or castes: the Brahmans, the intellectual and spiritual class; the Kshatriyas, the military and governmental class; the Vaishyas, the commercial and industrial class; and the Shudras, manual workers and labourers. This classification does not imply any superiority or inferiority. It simply stands for different vocations. “These classes define duties, they confer no privileges.” (26) Moreover, “it should not be forgotten that according to Hinduism reincarnation re-establishes a general equilibrium, as in the course of successive existence a *Brahman* becomes a *Shudra*, and vice versa.” (27) Later on he also raises voice for “untouchables” appeals for the pariahs.

Gandhi’s Condemnation of Western Civilization:

Gandhi was influenced by Tolstoi and Rolland says that Tolstoi’s influence has been strongest in their condemnation of European and Occidental civilization. Ever since Rousseau, our western civilization has been attacked by the broadest minds of Europe and Gandhi did not fail to do so. In his *Hind Swaraj*, he cites a list books written by Englishmen condemning European civilization. In his *Hind Swaraj*, he calls modern civilization the “great vice”. (29) Gandhi criticizes those of his compatriots who would want to drive out the English, to develop India themselves, and civilize her according to European standards. In his arraignment of Western civilization, Gandhi scores three categories of men, particularly, magistrates, doctors and teachers.

Gandhi’s objection to teacher is quite comprehensible, since they have brought the Hindus to neglect their own language and to disown their real aspirations. Besides, Western teacher appeal to the mind only: they neglect the education of the heart and of the character.

While condemning magistrates, he writes that the profession of magistrate is immoral. As for the medical profession, Gandhi admits he was attracted to it at first, but he soon realized that it was not so honourable. In opposition to the medical Science of the West, he praises preventive medical science. He also condemns the use of machinery. It was his ardent desire to see machinery wiped out of India. Rolland writes about Gandhi saying, "I am not a visionary, I claim to be a practical idealist." (35) Thus, in his campaign, Gandhi finds India insufficiently prepared to understand and practise the radical reforms he wishes to impose. Gandhi expresses it by the term *Satyagraha* which he defines as truth-force and love-force.

The Controversy Between Tagore and Gandhi:

Gandhi had not entered the political arena with a light heart. He is a political leader by necessity because other leaders disappear and the force of circumstances obliges him to take the place. He introduces the weapon of non-violence and non-cooperation. But there prevails a controversy between Tagore and Gandhi regarding it. Though Tagore admires Gandhi, he hated the element of negation contained in non-cooperation. At that time, Tagore was not only the great poet but he was also the spiritual ambassador of Asia to Europe. He had just returned from Europe where he asked people to cooperate in creating a world university at Santiniketan.

What an irony of destiny that he should be preaching co-operation between Occident and Orient at one end of the world, when at that very moment non-cooperation was being preached at the other end....Non-cooperation wounded him doubly, therefore, in his work as well as in his conception of life. "I believe," he says, "in the real union of Orient and Occident." (Rolland, 89)

Just as Goethe refused to reject French civilization and culture, Tagore refuses to banish western civilization. According to Tagore, we of the orient should learn from the

occident. Further he said that we had lost the power of appreciating our own culture and therefore we did not know how to assign Western culture to its right place. He began to fear the blind faith which the people placed on Gandhi. In his answer to Tagore, Gandhi says, “Non-co-operation is not directed against the English or the West. Our non-co-operation is directed against material civilization and its attendant greed and exploitation of the weak.” (102)

Thus, one can observe that Gandhi’s doctrine is much more broader, humane and universal.

Conclusion

Since the publication of Rolland’s biography of Gandhi in 1924, over four hundred books about Gandhi have been released. Today, Gandhi’s name and fame are so familiar that it is hard to envision a time when he was not part of our consciousness. Before, the French writer popularized his image fusing- anti-imperialism, the non-violent political philosophy and the holiness of his life- Gandhi was an obscure Indian lawyer, unknown in continental Europe or America. 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. Throughout the inter-war period, he protested European imperialism and predicted that the awakening nations would turn this violence against the European themselves. He was against violence from an intellectual as well as spiritual standpoint. Thus, he played an important role in supporting Gandhi and Indian independence as a literary and philosophical giant of the twentieth century. Thus, one can observe that Romain Rolland’s anti-imperialism was fundamentally Gandhian.

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