

## Gandhi and Romain Rolland Conversations – Art & Truth

(*Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram and Sat, Chit and Ananda*)

Dr. A. Raghu Kumar  
avadhanamraghukumar@gmail.com

The boycott of Simon Commission in 1928, and several incidents in its aftermath, led to an impasse in the ongoing dialogue for political reforms between Indian people and the British government. By 1930s, the socio-economic situation world over, was also undergoing rapid changes. The Wall Street crash of October 1929 and the spiraling world economic depression hit the Indian peasants, workers and trading classes as well. The political atmosphere was in total disarray. *Civil disobedience* or *armed revolution* – these were the two alternatives before the people. Younger elements in the Congress and elsewhere were impatiently in favour of militant action. But the elder generation, including Gandhi, knew well that England had stood on a better footing when it comes to dealing with revolutionary responses. Many freedom fighters were looking towards Gandhi for a call. For weeks, Gandhi had been waiting for the prompting of his ‘*inner voice*.’

On 2 March, 1930, Gandhi wrote a long letter to the Viceroy intending to start civil disobedience, now on the issue of Salt, giving a dead line of 11 March. The British Raj salt laws made it a punishable crime to possess salt not obtained from the British government monopoly. As usual the Government turned a cold eye to the caution of Gandhi. Many political leaders also felt the call for satyagraha on the issue of salt was inconsequential. But, as 11 March neared, Indians slowly turned to be fervent, sizzling with enthusiasm about the course of events to take place. Scores of foreign and domestic correspondents were swarming the Sabarmati Ashram. Thousands surrounded the village and waited. On 12 March, Gandhi and seventy eight satyagrahis of the Ashram left Sabarmati to Dandi, south of Ahmedabad. Through the winding roads from village to village, the entourage marched for two hundred and forty two miles in twenty four days. When Gandhi reached the sea at Dandi on 5 April, the caravan had grown into an army of several thousands. The next morning he picked up some salt left by the waves. Gandhi had broken the British law.

In fact, Gandhi’s act of walking all through two hundred and forty miles, with several colleague satyagrahis, in public view, and converting the spectacle into convergence of several thousands of Indians into a mela was intended to be an open and public defiance of the mighty Government. Louis Fischer wrote<sup>1</sup>: “Gandhi did two things in 1930; he made the British people aware that they were cruelly subjugating India, and he gave Indians the conviction that they could, by lifting their heads and straightening their spines, lift the yoke from their shoulders. After that, it was inevitable that Britain should someday refuse to rule India and that India should someday refuse to be ruled.” Another immediate consequence of the ‘inconsequential’ had been the revival of political dialogue with Congress in the Second Round Table Conference.

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, HarperCollins, London, p-345

Romain Rolland, the French dramatist, art theoretician and Nobel laureate [1915] wrote a philosophical biography of Gandhi - *Mahatma Gandhi*<sup>2</sup> in 1924, without ever visiting India, or even seeing or meeting Gandhi once. He also earlier wrote two great books on the teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda in the similar fashion. He was also instrumental in changing the course of the 'spiritual pilgrimage' of Madeleine Slade, daughter of a British admiral, from Beethoven to Gandhi. She was introduced to Gandhi through the words of Rolland: "He is another Christ", he said. He further said: "The only living person worthy of the sort of veneration you have felt for Beethoven is Mahatma Gandhi." These words deeply influenced Slade, who straight away came to India to join Gandhi in November 1925, became Mirabehn, spent 33 years of her life in India, and she returned to England in 1959, again spent the rest of her life in the devotion of Beethoven. She started her life in a divine love to Beethoven, and ended it again in the same, while in the intervening period Gandhi took the place of Beethoven.

At the end of the Second Round Table Conference, while on his way back home, Gandhi visited Rolland's villa near Geneva, on the specific insistence of Mirabehn. The meeting between Gandhi and Europe's one of leading pacifists took place for six days December 1931. In those few days several European intellectuals met him and discussed various issues with him. In the backdrop of failed Western rationality in the wake of the WWI, the Europe was in a moral and ethical crisis. In this milieu, a deeply insightful and passionate dialogue took place between the two great minds on the subject of Truth, God and Art. Robert Payne<sup>3</sup> wrote: 'But Romain Rolland no longer possessed the fire of St. Dominic. Old, sick and disillusioned, he was coming more and more under the influence of communism, and his first words were to express his profound regret that Gandhi never met Lenin. "Lenin, like you, never compromised with the truth," he exclaimed.' The conversations<sup>4</sup> between these two great men were recorded by Rolland's sister.

Romain Rolland asked Gandhi as to why he regarded God as Truth. Gandhi replied: 'In my very early youth I was taught that the Hindu scriptures knew almost a thousand names of God, but these thousand names are not nearly enough. *I believe that God has as many names as there are living creatures, and this is why we also say that God is without name. And since God has many forms, we also consider him as being without form. And since he speaks to us in many tongues, we consider him speechless. ...* With those who say that God is Love, I too say that God is Love. But in my heart I thought that though God may be Love, God is, above all, **Truth**. If it is possible for human language to give its complete description of God, my conclusion is that for me, *God is Truth*. But two years ago I made a step further, to say that **Truth is God**' [Emphasis supplied].

"Gandhi explains that he came to this conclusion after an 'incessant search for Truth' which had begun about fifty years earlier. He had felt then that the nearest approach to Truth was made by 'love', but he had recognized that the word 'love' has many meanings in the English language. Moreover, human love, in the sense of passion, could also become 'a

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<sup>2</sup>Romain Rolland *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man who became One with the Universal Being*, Translation from the French by Catherine D. Groth, Publications Division, Govt. of India, 1924, 2004

<sup>3</sup>Robert Payne: *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*. © Sheila Lalwani Payne (1997), Rupa & Co., Delhi, p.420

<sup>4</sup>The content of the conversations we taken from Sudhendra Kulkarni (2012), *Music of the Spinning Wheel*, Amaryllis, New Delhi, pp.187-195

degrading thing'<sup>5</sup>. He added: '*But I have never found a double meaning to the word "Truth". Even the atheists do not doubt the necessity or the power of Truth. In their passion to discover Truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the existence of God – and from their point of view they are right*'. Gandhi then continues to give more reasons for his belief that 'Truth is God': 'I might add that millions have used the name of God and committed atrocities in his name. This is not to say that scientists, too, do not very often commit cruelties in the name of Truth; I know how in the name of science and truth, all sorts of frightful cruelties are perpetrated on animals by vivisection. So there are a certain number of difficulties on the way, however one describes God. But the human mind has its limitation, and we must work within these limitations when we try to conceive of a Being or an Entity beyond our powers of apprehension. ... The Sanskrit word for Truth means literally "That which exists – **Sat**". For this and for several other reasons I have come to the conclusion that the definition "Truth is God" satisfies me best. And when you want to find the Truth which is God, the only infallible way to it is by Love, which means Nonviolence' [Emphasis supplied].

At this point, Roland interjected the flow with a question – 'But what is Truth?' Gandhi answered it with the same steady reflection: 'A difficult question. But I have solved it for myself by saying that it is what the *inner voice* tells us. You will ask: "How is it then that different people think different and contrary truths? Well, we see that the human spirit works through innumerable media, and that the evolution of the human mind is not the same for all men. *It follows that what may be truth for one man is non-truth for another.* ... all I can say to you in all true humility is that Truth cannot be found by anyone who has not achieved an abundant sense of humility. *If you want to swim in the bosom of the Ocean of Truth, you must reduce yourself to zero.* I can go no further along this fascinating path' [Emphasis supplied].

Rolland expressed certain reservations about Gandhi's explanation in respect of the attributes of Truth. If truth can be approached through '*what the inner voice tells us*', there can be no universal truth and the idea of truth itself becomes an uncertain project. In doing so, he also drew Gandhi's attention to another important element in their discussion i.e., **art**. Rolland: 'If it is true that "Truth is God", it seems to me that it lacks a very important attribute of God, which is **Joy**. For – and I insist on this – I cannot conceive of a God without joy. ... I found this joy, which truth was not sufficient to prove to me, in **beauty**, and this is where I found myself in opposition to Tolstoy; I attribute a capital importance to art and beauty. By this I mean true art and healthy beauty.' 'Great art has harmony as its essence, and it brings peace, health and equilibrium to the soul. It communicates them at once by the sense and by the mind, for both senses and mind have the right joy. Beauty manifests itself in many ways; beauty of line, beauty of sound, beauty of colors, etc., and at the bottom of them all, the inner order, the hidden harmony which is in essence moral. The troubles of the soul are filtered and sublimated through it. Art is the bread of thousands of souls, above all in some refined races, who without beauty (either in nature or in art) would be destitute. All the different routes leading to peace and harmony are good; none of them must be closed, and the ideal would be to associate them all: - which happens in history at some supreme moments when all the inner forces of a people run together, producing books of religion, beauty, science and dreams for whole peoples.'

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<sup>5</sup>Sudheendra Kulkarni, *ibid*, p.188

Rolland's thoughts on 'art' prompted Gandhi to explain his own views on the subject. *'For me, the definition of Truth is a universal one. The Truth is made manifest in many ways. Any art which is inconsistent with Truth, which is not linked to Truth, is no art. I would not classify art as a thing distinct from Truth. I am against the formula "art for art's sake"; for me, art must be based on Truth. I reject beautiful things which pass for art if they express non-truth instead of Truth. I would subscribe to the formula: "Art brings joy and is good", - but on the condition I have stated. By Truth in art I do not mean the exact reproduction of exterior objects; it is the living object which brings living joy to the soul and which must elevate the soul. If a work does not achieve this, it is worthless. If Truth does not bring joy, it is because Truth is not in you....'* Then Gandhi spoke of a Hindu religious song of morning prayers, and the holy formula 'sat-chit-ananda': '*sat*' meaning 'truth', '*chit*' 'that which lives' and 'true knowledge' (knowledge that is not void of true perception), and '*ananda*' 'ineffable joy'. In this conception, Truth is inseparable from joy. 'Yet,' Gandhi insists,<sup>6</sup> 'one must suffer in the search for Truth; one must undergo disappointments, fatigues and afflictions without number; but despite everything you draw joy and felicity from it' [Emphasis supplied].

The Gandhi-Rolland dialogue also focused on the menacing political situation in Europe, whose sky was already being darkened by the clouds of fascism and the approaching Second World War. Madeleine Rolland, the writer's sister, who recorded this conversation wrote<sup>7</sup>: 'They discuss the grave problems which they have at heart, my brother describes for Gandhi the tragic situation of Europe – the sufferings of the people oppressed by dictators; the drama of the proletariat who in their desperate effort to break the shackles of an anonymous and ruthless capitalism and pushed forward by their legitimate aspiration for justice and freedom, see only one way out, that of rebellion and violence. *For man in the West is by education, by tradition and by temperament unprepared for the religion of ahimsa... Gandhi listens, reflects... when he answers, he reaffirms his unshakeable faith in the full power of nonviolence... At times their conclusions vary: yet always they commune with each other through their common love for humanity, their identical desire to alleviate its misery, their fervent search for Truth, in its multiplicity of aspects.'*

What is the significance of this conversation between the two greats of the time from West and the East in terms of ontological and epistemological studies? "The East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" says the refrain of Rudyard Kipling's ballad – 'The Ballad of East and West'. Are there any congruent areas in the thinking of the East and the West? In Gandhi's explanative we find two strands – that he revised his idea of 'God is truth' to 'Truth is God', and that 'Joy' is a part of truth. What significance can a modern reader attach to the revised idea of Gandhi from 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'? The first and foremost is the subordination of God to Truth, a decisive step forward in achieving unity of thought between the believer and non-believer. As far as the reformation of idea of 'Truth is God' is concerned, it also has several connotations and provides for several possibilities in social sciences. Atheists, rationalists, materialists, and Marxists of all varieties deny the existence of any super-human reality. There may not be a God to them, but there is truth. Still, if there can be a Truth which takes into its fold – 'God', by subordinating God to Truth - if God can be proved within the

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<sup>6</sup>Sudheendra Kulkarni, *ibid*, p.191

<sup>7</sup> Sudheendra Kulkarni, *ibid*, p.193

parameters of Truth, there is no reason to deny his existence. The eternally contentious matter can thus be temporarily kept in abeyance and the two camps can work together. It is an original proposition of an agnostic. It allows the believer within the fold of a seeker of truth; it also doesn't deny him his existential position by degrading him to unscientific subhuman. He is now a co-traveler along with the so called 'enlightened beings' having the so called Midas touch of rationalistic thinking.

The second narrative in the discourse - 'There could be no joy if it is not true, since there can be no art which is not true.' 'Joy' is the *raison d'être* of the art – both in the East and the West. Art is conceived as one which gives 'joy'. But the complementary question that troubles the mind of a true artist always is – 'Can there be a joy based on falsehood?' And if there is one – can it give 'a joy forever'? 'A thing of beauty is joy forever!' proclaimed John Keats. The question again sought is – can there be a beauty which is not true? In defining the idea of God or Godhead, the Hindu philosophy invokes two important concepts, apart from the *nirguna and niraakara* meant for higher mediations. One is *sat, chit, ananda* and the other is *satyam, sivam, sundaram*. The second one defines more attributes – Truth, Goodness, and Beautiful. Both these concepts together constitute the idea of 'art' equally in an enlightened proposition and contain in its fold – the concepts of the West and the East in this area.

In the '*Republic*', Plato considered art as an imitation of the object and events of ordinary life, – a work of art is '*a copy of a copy of a form*'. 'Art as form' has its own adherents even in the twentieth century West in 'formalists'. The [www.britanica.com](http://www.britanica.com) considers the meaning of 'formalism' as one that 'can best be seen by noting what it was reacting against: art as representation, art as expression, art as a vehicle of truth or knowledge or moral betterment or social improvement.' In the Indian Hindu tradition – the word '*sahitya*' (*sa + hita*) connotes the good of the reader or the society in general. *Sahitya*, an art form, is pursued by the classical Hinduism for the 'truth', 'knowledge' or moral upliftment of the target group. This idea is very much available in the Communist / Marxist tradition also, though with the emphasis on non-spiritual or rather materialist concerns. 'Art for art sake' is challenged by many including religious theorists, socialist and communist theorists.

This controversy has always been there, and Gandhi's contribution to the predominant ideas of the West - 'art for art sake' or 'art as a copy of a copy of the nature' is a continuum in the discourse. But in Gandhian discourse, reassessing Gandhi's ideas of art is significant in the sense that Gandhi was projected as ignorant this area, which is not true. "Gandhi's contributions to the general field of the arts are not given the kind of attention that they deserve," contends Anthony J Parel<sup>8</sup>. Gandhi put two great theories of art of his time – Leo Tolstoy's '*What is Art?*' and John Ruskin's '*A joy for Ever*' – *And Its Place in the Market*,' as Appendices to his Hindu *Swaraj*, which according to Parel proves the point that Gandhi had a serious interest in art, but the interest is laid in the practical side of things more than theoretical ones. Parel gives a detailed analysis of Gandhi's ideas on art in the chapter on "Art and society" in his comprehensive exposition of Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony<sup>9</sup>. He had an idea of art, and that was constructed on the traditional Hindu concept of 'satyam, sivam, sundaram' or

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<sup>8</sup>Anthony J. Parel (2006), *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge p. 157

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit

‘sat, chit, ananda’ which includes in its comprehensive schema – truth, good, beauty, consciousness and joy.

One important interception in the conversations was the role of ‘*inner voice*’, especially in social and personal experiments of a public intellectual. ‘*Positivism*’ is a philosophical system which recognizes only that truth which can be scientifically verified or which is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and thereby rejects metaphysics and theism. But the confidence of scientific positivism has its own inconvenient questions in the recent developments in science. Even physical sciences and mathematics, the so-called definitive sciences, at certain higher levels, from the mid of twentieth century, entertained such concepts as ‘relativity’ and ‘uncertainty’. The most advanced studies in astrophysics and human biology – genetics, DNA structures etc., also led to awe and wonder bordering spirituality. It has its own impact on social sciences. It has sufficiently shaken the solid structures of scientific, rationalist and materialistic thinking in the recent past. The condescending approaches of one to the other as possessing the higher truth have been challenged seriously in the twentieth century sociology through ‘cultural or social relativism’. Now, in the social dialogue, we can allow space for pluralistic nature of ‘truth’. In the heydays of positivism, and much before the relativistic social sciences emerged, Gandhi powerfully argued for such an eventuality by invoking the idea of ‘*inner voice*’.

Most of the religious or other social conflicts emerge out of the exclusivist claims by one to have an access for higher truth. Gandhi advocated the possibility of ‘plural or multiple truths’ within the idea of ‘Universal Truth’. ‘*Inner voice*’ is not unknown to the religious or theological truths. ‘*Intuition*’ has always been the known method in many theological systems. The difficulty arises from the societal pressures in the form of ‘authority’ – scientific, rationale, materialistic, in stifling this tool of epistemology, and placing ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ of a special kind above every other method in validating knowledge. Gandhi is one, in modern times, but much in advance, who restored this ‘intuition’ or ‘inner voice’ to its respectable place, which can release a seeker of ‘truth’ from many unwarranted and suffocating socio-psychological compulsions. It offers scope for pluralistic concept of truth and its existence in many ways simultaneously – a kind of *Anekantavada* of *Jainism*, and thus helps in reducing social tensions. The possibility of coexistence of the science of a higher mind and the belief systems of a common man, and the rare synthesis in this regard is undeniably one contribution of Gandhi.