

ESSAY

Of Abantikumar Sanyal and Romain Rolland

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

Romain Rolland (1866-1944), the French Nobel Laureate for literature in 1915, was one of the pioneering western philosophers who played a role in disseminating Indian spiritual philosophy in the West. He developed links with many Bengali figures, such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937). His biographies called *Vie de Ramakrishna* (1929) and *Vie de Vivekananda* (1930) promoted Indian spiritual ideologies across the world. All such facts have meticulously been researched by the Bengali writer Abantikumar Sanyal (1926-2007), who was born in tradition-rich village Korokdi in district Faridpur and who has two books on Rolland and two translations of Rolland's books to his credit.

Abantikumar Sanyal was born in a cultural family which produced many personalities who contributed hugely to literature, politics, culture and sports in undivided Bengal. There was Ajit Sanyal (b 1926), who wrote *Dui Desh Dui Mon* (1959) on his Europe visit in 1953 with the dance guru Bulbul Chowdhury; there were too Sulekha Sanyal (1918-1962), who wrote *Nabankur (The Seedling's Story)*, 1955 and many stories on the partition of India and the Bengal famine; and Sujata Sanyal, who has a good number of volumes of poetry to her credit. They were all his siblings. Being the eldest child in the family, Abantikumar spent his childhood and adolescence in Faridpur and Chittagong. Later he went to Scottish Church College in Kolkata, before graduation and post graduation from the Bangla Department of Kolkata University.

Abantikumar started his literary career during his student life. He developed proficiency in four languages Sanskrit, French, English and his mother tongue Bangla which helped him to work in a multidimensional arena. He has translated a good number of books by Howard Fast, Mikhail Sholokhov, Kishan Chander, Maupassant, etc. His collections of

essays are *Prachin Natyoprosongo* (Ancient Dramatics, 1972), *Bangla Natoker Prothom Path* (First Lessons of Bangla Drama, 1986), *Bharotio Kabyototto* (Indian Poetics, 1986) and *Babu* (1987). In addition, there are *Rabindranather Godyorit* (Prose Style of Rabindranath, 1970) and *Kobir Obhinoy* (Acting of the Poet, 1996).

The books that Abantikumar wrote in relation to France, the French language and Romain Rolland are *Proshongo: Romain Rolland* (1991) and *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda O Romain Rolland* (2002). Moreover, he translated Romain Rolland's two books into Bangla with the titles *Bharatborsho* (1976) and *Moscow'r Dinolipi* (1995). In *Proshongo Romain Rolland* Abantikumar has sketched Rolland's connection with three great Indians --- Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jagadish Chandra Bose. The latter book focuses, as the title suggests, on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

It may be remembered that Rolland developed a sort of craftsmanship in writing biographies, starting with *Life of Beethoven* (1903), followed by *Life of Michelangelo* (1907), *Handel* (1910) and *Life of Tolstoy* (1911). The other point worth mentioning is Rolland's interest in Indian philosophy. Abantikumar, who retired as a professor of Bangla from Burdwan University, has delineated all these turns in Rolland's life.

It might be well-known fact to readers of Rabindranath that in 1916 when the poet visited Japan for the first time, he delivered a lecture called 'The Message of India' at Tokyo Royal University on 18 June. The lecture was published in the *New York Journal Outlook* on 9 August. Rolland felt deeply drawn to the thoughts that Rabindranath expressed in his lecture and published it with the title 'Message de L'Inde au Japon' in his booklet *Aux Peuples Assassinés* along with an essay of his own without taking any prior consent from Rabindranath. Let us not forget that these two great litterateurs of the world were at the time not acquainted with each other and had not even read



Abantikumar Sanyal



Romain Rolland

each other's writings. Abantikumar Sanyal has provided a factual narrative of how Rolland got acquainted with Indians and Indian philosophy from his early youth.

It is assumed that Rolland happened to get *The Bhagavad* translated by Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852), which he mistakenly referred to as *The Bhagavad Gita* afterwards, so Abantikumar comments. But there is the use of verses from *The Gita* in his magnum opus *Jean-Christophe*. In the volume 'Dans la maison' Olivier takes a book from the shelf called *l'apostrophe du dieu Krishna* which Christophe snatches from him and reads from it. Olivier read the 37-38 verses of the second part of *The Gita* and Christopher read 22-24 verses of the third part.

The first direct interaction of Rolland with the Indian people occurred during World War I. Rolland was very much against the war from the beginning. By then ten volumes of *Jean-Christophe* had come out. He published an essay, 'A-dessus de la mêlée', (Above the Battle) which invited criticism from nationalist intellectuals. They began to attack him through writings. Threats at personal levels were also not irregular. Publishers began to boycott him. During those days Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947)

wrote an essay on 24 December 1914, which he dedicated to Rolland. Then an exchange of letters between Rolland and Coomaraswamy commenced. Coomaraswamy sent Rolland a copy of the translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* along with his own book, *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913). Coomaraswamy was the first person who came into personal interaction with Rolland, as Abantikumar notes.

In 1921 a historic meeting between Rabindranath and Rolland took place. It was 19 April when Rabindranath met Rolland in Paris, which led to thoughts of a new possibility of international peace. During these years many more writers and intellectuals, Indian and non-Indian, met Rolland in relation to Rabindranath and Mahatma Gandhi. The people who met Rolland included Kalidas Nag (April 1922, September 1923), Pearson (September 1923), Lala Lajpat Rai (June 1924) and many more. In the year 1924, Rolland first published a biography of an Indian. It was on Mahatma Gandhi. Abantikumar has pointed that before September 1926, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were quite unknown to Rolland.

The writer asserted that the first interaction between Rolland and Jagadish Chandra Bose started through letters. In March 1924, after his speech at Paris

University, J C Bose first wrote to Rolland. He enclosed his booklet, *Circulation and Assimilation of Plants*, along with the letter. Returning home on 20 May, Jagadish Chandra again wrote to Rolland. This time he enclosed his book, *Response in the Living and Non-Living* (1902), and *The Life and Work of J C Bose* (1920), by Patrick Geddes. During his eighth tour to Europe Jagadish Chandra called on Rolland on 9 July.

Now let us see how Rolland came to know of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. There is no denying that Abantikumar's *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda O Romain Rolland* is a milestone in rediscovering that relationship. Rolland first heard of Ramakrishna from Dhan Gopal Mukerji (1890-1936). Dhan Gopal, whose award winning book, *Gay Neck: The Story of a Pigeon*, came out in 1927, was a well-known English-language Indian writer by then. His *The Silence of Face*, a biography of Ramakrishna published in 1926, became one of the forty famous books of the United Nations selected for its library in Geneva. Rolland read Dhan Gopal's book and felt interested in meeting him. The meeting materialised in October of the same year. Rolland requested Dhan Gopal to introduce him to the Ramakrishna Math. And what a coincidence! During this time Josephine Macleod, who had been in close contact with Vivekananda for about seven years, came in touch with Rolland and spent some days with him and all these opened the door for Rolland to write on the great Indian souls.

Rolland finished the Ramakrishna biography in December 1928. The biography of Vivekananda was finished by June 1929. And the exclusive news was that before the publication of the original French biographies, their English translations were published in India. The translation by E. F. Malcolm-Smith from Advaita Ashram are available in the market even now.

Abantikumar has delineated the total historic time in their full detail in his works. His evaluation of the two books by Rolland is also included. He also informs

readers that the publication of the French-language biographies encouraged many to publish those two in their own languages. In a very short time, a German edition from Zurich, a Dutch edition from Holland, a Swedish edition from Stockholm and a Spanish edition from Madrid got published by 1931. Abantikumar has also incorporated a reliable account of the reactions to the books from around the world.

Rolland did not know Bangla, not even English, though the individuals whose biographies he was going to write were Bengalis, with English as their second language and with no access to French. His sister Madeleine Rolland knew English and could read Bangla too. When in 1910 Rolland met with a motor accident and became totally crippled, it was Madeleine who took up the responsibility of caring for her brother. While sitting together in the long evenings she would read all the books by Vivekananda and letters of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. That was when Rolland began to envision composing the biographies of the Indian spiritual gurus.

Let me end on a personal note. I have had a fascination for the history of Korokdi from my very adolescence. When I learnt about Sulekha Sanyal from a Kolkata little magazine, I felt I needed to know more about the people of that village. Gradually there appeared Abantikumar Sanyal, from whom I got two letters. The second letter was written on 19 June 2002 after the publication of *Ramakrishna-Vivekananda O Romain Rolland*. Abantikumar Sanyal wrote: "After researching on French literature for about thirty years, I have collected a huge amount of materials on Rabindranath and Romain Rolland. I am worried I won't be able to write my last book on the subject." Abantikumar lived for more than five years after that letter. How much of thought did he formulate on the relations between Rabindranath and Rolland?

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher and essayist, has set up a website called www.bangladeshinovels.com

NON-FICTION

Memories of Old Dhaka: Thoughts After Visiting Pogose School

ABDULLAH SHIBLY

Last summer, my wife informed me that she was planning to take some of her students to Bangladesh. "Interesting!" I remarked, and went back to the newspaper story I was reading about a new archeological discovery in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, an area we visited a few years ago. I am not sure if it was my apparent lack of interest in her project, or my total immersion in my new passion, Egyptology, that prompted her next remark. "Well, if you join us, you will be able to travel in Bangladesh almost for free." That added attraction obviously tipped the scales for me.

So, in January 2010, I joined a group of graduate and undergraduate Social Work students from an American university to spend two weeks on a study tour of Bangladesh. Since the study tour was part of a university curriculum, and earned those enrolled in it three credits towards their respective degrees, the itinerary and program were very rigorous and demanding, I must add. We visited some of the major NGOs in Dhaka and met with people from all walks of life in the Sundarbans, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Cox's Bazar.

On the last full day of the tour, Dharioti, our local tour collaborator, had arranged for a Heritage Walk, a two-mile sojourn through Old Dhaka, starting at Sutrapur, along BK Das Road to Shyambazar, and ending at Ahsan Manzil. Our guides, Taimur and Humaira, architects who lead an organization known as Urban Study Group, had volunteered for this special occasion. So, on this beautiful Friday morning of 15 January, this wonderful pair spent more than four hours giving us one of the most fascinating accounts of the history of Dhaka and offering us a crash course on the architectural features of the old town. Towards the end of this walk, while we were proceeding towards Shankhari Bazaar, one of Taimur's assistants, Faruk, led us to Pogose School. I had casually mentioned to him earlier that I had gone to Pogose School and he, being a Pogose School alumnus himself, strongly recommended that we peek into the school. As we entered through the gate, I could not take my eyes off the two-story elongated brick building facing us, where many, many years ago, I would sit down on a wooden bench and spend hours chatting with my classmates Dinu, Ghias, and Bazlu.

Looking back

This was my first visit to Pogose School in more than forty-five years. My four brothers and I attended Pogose School for almost a year when I was enrolled in Class VII. I was twelve years old then and my family had just moved to Dhaka from Barisal. After the move, we lived for a few months in Azimpur Colony and subsequently found accommodation in one of the newly constructed government apartments in Eskaton Gardens. Finding a suitable school for his five school-going sons proved to be a daunting task for my father since the transfer order came at the end of the school year. Fortunately, he was able to convince the then Headmaster of Pogose School, Mr. Fazlul Haque, who took pity on my father and agreed to admit all of us without any admission test. One reason my poor father was happy that we all got into Pogose School was that the school was located within walking distance of his office, the Dhaka District Judges Court at Victoria Park. However, arranging the trip from home to Pogose School, which was located in the old city, while we lived in the new city, was a major undertaking every day for my father. He did not own a car then, and auto-rickshaws were our primary means of transport. Unfortunately, no auto-rickshaw driver would take six passengers, i.e., one adult and five children; and even if we were lucky enough to find one, the six of us could not fit into its cab even if some of us sat on each other's laps. So, right away, we had a major logistical challenge that needed to be resolved.

The solution to this "transportation fix" was reached through a process of trial and error. We resolved right away that my three younger brothers, Bacchu, Swapan and Ratan were too young to go to school on their own. Since we had just moved back to Dhaka from my father's multiple tours of

duties that government servants had to undertake during their service years in the case of my father to Karachi, Mymensingh and Barisal before returning to Dhaka--even the older ones, my elder brother, Shadani, and I, were just getting used to the Dhaka roads and gradually becoming familiar with the public transport system and geography, and picking up the street sense necessary for navigating a modern city. We soon learned, even in those days when life was far less complicated, that there were many hazards lurking on the roads and in the neighborhoods where we lived that posed a threat to unescorted children, particularly what used to be put under the catch-all category, "chheley dhora". Both Shadani and I were from an early age comfortable going to school on our own, and were independent in getting around in the city. This, odd as it might appear, I attribute to the years in the mofussil towns. In both Mymensingh and Barisal, where we spent four early years during my father's stints there, we were able to go to school on our own, and we spent a great deal of time exploring the respective towns and the outlying areas virtually all by ourselves without any adult supervision. During the process of solving the "transportation fix", my father wanted one of his older sons, either me or Shadani, to travel with him in the auto rickshaw to keep the younger ones from falling off of one end of the open cab as he held the other end. But, that also meant that either Shadani or I had to go to school separately from the group going in the auto-rickshaw and I volunteered for that role.

The ride to school

When we were living in Azimpur, the bus trip to Sadarghat was pretty straightforward, except for the fact that the ride was very bumpy and the buses were always crowded. The route between New Market (where I'd catch the bus in front of Eden College) and Sadarghat had a direct service, and it went through Islampur and Chawk Bazar. Only old narrow buses plied this route, and since I frequently sat at the front of the bus, on seats reserved for women and children (the "Ladies Seat"), I had to inhale the diesel fumes originating from the engine located a few feet away, causing me to fall sick on a couple of occasions. The journey through the old city was unexciting, except for the frequent stops the bus had to make as it attempted to negotiate the narrow roads in that part of Dhaka, and the heavy pedestrian traffic competing with rickshaws, bicycles, bullock carts, and motor vehicles in the congested sections of the old city.

After we moved to Eskaton, a few months after the school year started, it became my daily routine to make the long trip from Eskaton to Sadarghat and back, by bus. I would get on the bus from Maghbazar or New Eskaton and change at Gulistan to catch another bus traveling along Nawabpur Road to Sadarghat. The first leg would be done on a bus run by the East Pakistan Road Transport Corporation (EPRTC) which was cheaper to ride than a private bus because the government bus offered school-going children a discount. I would get eight annas (half a rupee) from my father for the round trip. The ride from Maghbazar to Gulistan cost one anna, and the ride from Gulistan to Victoria Park, the stop before Sadarghat, where I usually got off, would cost me one and a half annas. However, sometimes the bus from Gulistan to Nawabpur would be late or over-crowded, and in those situations, I soon mastered the trick of walking the distance from Gulistan to the school.

The trip each way would take anywhere from an hour to 90 minutes. The EPRTC bus took a longer time since it did not take the shortest route from Maghbazar to Gulistan. From the Maghbazar Chourasta it travelled east taking the Outer Circular Road and when it reached Malibagh it would turn south and go through Shanti Nagar, before turning west at Kakrail to go past Ramna Park. The private buses took a shorter route, and made a right turn at Maghbazar to go past Holy Family Hospital, Ramna Thana and Tip Top Mosque before making a right turn on Inner Circular Road. To our chagrin, the private buses did not give a student discount, and a half anna was big money for a twelve year old with no pocket allowance.

I often had to make a difficult choice between taking the private bus which cost more, but saved time, and then save money by walking from Gulistan to the school using up the time gained. The trade-off between saving time and my allowance was real, and the thrill of this decision-making process added an extra edge to my daily routine.

As I look back, I can see walking had its other advantages too. Nawabpur Road was a colorful place, with shops lining its entire length, and various processions criss-crossing the area almost daily. The road-side peddlers, ferriwalas, selling the best jhal muri, cane juice, and pickled amra, boro, and chahta were an added attraction. Every penny I could save from my conveyance allowance would go towards tasting the delectable fares offered, and would also provide energy and nourishment needed for the walk. Typically, on my way back from school, I would walk at a leisurely pace, sampling the various goods on display on the sidewalk, getting a drink, and tasting the street-side food. For entertainment, there was the ubiquitous "band party" accompanying a wedding or to publicize a newly-released movie. Later in life, as I grew older and even nowadays on my trips back home, I have always enjoyed eating and tasting food and snacks from roadside vendors. While I have always been advised to stay away from them for health and sanitary reasons, I have never had a problem with these tasty but questionable edibles. On reflection, I attribute my strong stomach to the conditioning that I underwent during the Gulistan to Sadarghat walk. I will admit though that I was not totally oblivious to the hazards that a young boy faced even in those days: I would particularly mention three that I was conscious of and tried my best to guard against: child kidnapping, motor traffic in Nawabpur Road, and the possibility of germs and other bacteria that might be ingested with the food and drink bought from the sidewalk vendors.

Notwithstanding the arduous nature of my daily trek, and the various distractions of the colorful Nawabpur Road offered, I always made an effort to be at school on time. The reason I was anxious not to miss the first period was my Bangla literature class which met in the first period on three days a week. My Bangla teacher, who had just joined the school faculty after finishing his Master's from Dhaka University, was a very energetic and friendly person named Nazrul Islam. Later in life, when I had the privilege of also having Prof. Abdullah Abu Sayeed as my Bangla professor in Dhaka College, I would see many similarities between these two individuals. When I first met them, they both were young, humorous, and made the class very interesting by interjecting references to historical events and allusions to world literature during their lectures. As a twelve year boy with interest in movies, sports, and other disciplines outside the classroom, the Bangla class in Class VII at Pogose School offered me the chance to listen to a good speaker with an intellectual bent. Because of my own curious nature, I found this first period class interesting enough to always put in an extra effort to be in school on time.

Cutting Classes After Tiffin

Oddly enough, I also remember my eight months at Pogose School for the adventure I experienced each day not only in getting to school on time, and back, but also for the opportunity I created for myself to cut classes after the lunch break, the Tiffin Time. I found out soon from the other kids that if I could produce a letter signed by a parent requesting early discharge, the Headmaster's Office was willing to approve these applications. I am not sure after all these years the factors that motivated me in the first place to forge these petitions. However, not all the signatures were forged though. On at least one occasion, I pampered my uncle to give his autograph on a blank piece of paper, which I then was able to convert into a petition by writing a leave application with his signature at the bottom of the sheet.

The urge to cut classes arose from two favorable

circumstances: the location of many cinema halls within walking distance, and the regular show of good classical Hindi movies in those theatres. Although I was very young then, I read "Ghoroa" regularly and had just discovered the big stars of those days: Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, and others. When I heard that Daag, in which Dilip Kumar played the role of a jilted lover, was coming to RoopMahal, I marshaled all the resources at my disposal to see a matinee show. The shows ran from 3 to 5:30 and I figured that if I could get out of school at 2 PM I could see the movie and be home before sunset. Once this scheme worked the first time, I became addicted. Soon, reruns of all the classics such as Aaan, Andaaz, and Barsaat started to be announced and I made going to movies once in a while an exciting component of my school-day activities. The cinema hall Mukul was on Nawabpur Road right before Victoria Park, and the bus route would take us past Mukul with its well-decorated marquee at the entrance and walls pasted with big posters announcing forthcoming features. As days passed, I became even more enchanted and devoted to Indian cinema and movie-going. Needless to say, my little adventures went undetected by both the school authorities and my parents. Besides Mukul, other cinema halls within walking distance were Lion, Roop Mahal, Nagar Mahal, Nishat, Shabistan, Azad, Star and Moon.

Another characteristic of my class in Pogose School I remember very well was its diversity. It is worth remembering that this was a time before the India Pakistan War of 1965, and Hindus and Muslims were living in harmony in Old Dhaka. My classmates were evenly divided between Hindu and Muslim students, and I remember being as excited during the different Puja Parban ceremonies as Eid, Muharram, or Shab-e-Barat. The Pujas, especially the Durga Puja, when the Devi would be taken to Sadar Ghat for immersion was an exciting time for all of us in the class. I still remember that my fellow students were discussing, in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962, how India was rebuilding its Army under Gen. J.N. Choudhury, the new C-in-C, and we were more sympathetic to India than to China. For me, the diversity in the school was not an entirely new experience. We had just moved to Dhaka from Barisal and Mymensingh, where the Pujas were one of the best occasions when my brothers and I had a great time.

Finale

Coming back to the present, during our Heritage Walk, which happened on a Friday, the school was closed but there was a cricket match in progress when we reached the school. The school playground, which did not have a shard of grass then and now, appeared to have changed very little in forty five years. I was not sure before we entered the school premises whether the buildings and grounds would look very different or would show the signs of age. I was somewhat surprised that if anything, the buildings not only looked the same as I had seen them many years ago, but also had put on a very bright and colorful appearance. The main building which houses the administrative offices, including the Headmaster's Office, seemed to have been freshly painted and gave me considerable pleasure both because it gave me the reassurance that the school was well taken care off, and also because I could show it off to the guests. "I went to this school", I proudly pointed out to them. I don't remember now whether we had any science class in Class VII, other than the General Science class which was a common feature of the middle school curriculum, but we joined a bunch of high school students, onlookers, and cricket fans in purchasing "sun glasses" for ten taka to watch the solar eclipse that was in progress. Thus, our short visit to the school provided a rare opportunity to brush up our understanding of lunar and solar eclipses.

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POETRY

Can we say it now?

MADAN SHAHU

Imagine you and I strolling in a park side by side
In the quiet of trees and meadows wide
Trying to tell what we couldn't say to each other for
long
Though we met so many times before and strolled
along
Sat side by side on benches under bowers
And talked what rubbish, I can't recall, for hours
But never dared to say what certainly we were long-
ing for
Bearing in our hearts a forgotten 'mon amor'
Imagine we really try and brace up to say it this time
Yet blushing and staring askance should it end in
mime?
Imagine we collect the courage and hold hand in
hand
Look eye to eye, stir within, start muttering and
stand --
Can we say it after so many years of wait and urge
That it's still captive in heart, only to be made at
large?

No Need to RSVP

NAHID KHAN

Here is my invitation card
If you must, think hard
It may rain at night
There may be no light.
All the time in the world
I have, you take your time.
But don't send an RSVP-
Just looking at your favourite recipe
And turned the iron on
To put your favourite colour on.
Don't send an RSVP
No please, not just yet.
Let me live up to the hope
Even if you don't, I won't give up.
I shall wait till sunset
Till sunrise and sunset again
When I wait, there's less pain.
Just don't send an RSVP
I am scared of an apology.
Don't send the RSVP
No, please, not just yet.
Keep the card, think hard
I have all the time in the world
Just in case you change your mind
You know me, where to find me,
Just in case you decide to come
I will be right there to welcome you.
Next to the sunrise or sunset
But please don't say no, just yet.

The Mark of Ending

JUNAN NASHIT

Then nothing was in the unclouded envelope
Beside this decision lonely solar sphere
is in deeper silence than dark.
How the uneven arrangement becomes
in the start of ending
As those are not human
Touching your eyes I say
Lets light up there
Forgetting the blankness of other bank
Though the great heat in the envelope
Spread around the dishonor of waiting
And the doubt of day
like mythical thirst.
May be I would reach
to the credible alliance
Stretching the strange simple questions
At the end of road
lighting the road less light
Although the faultless fate didn't allow
to remove the wet hairs of earth.

Translated by Shamsul Faiz