

Radhaji: From Here to There

S. Harihara Raghavan



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From June 1993 until her passing, I could get a glimpse of the personality of Mrs Radha Burnier, her intuitive wisdom, and deep spiritual insight. She was an erudite scholar, a brilliant orator, an exemplary editor, a master essayist, a fearless administrator, an outstanding practitioner of brotherhood extending to the animal and plant kingdom, an intellect of the sharpest acumen, and an uncompromising personality where the question of right and wrong was concerned. Radha Burnier was a real philanthropist with an overflowing charitable disposition to the needy, the weak, and the orphaned.

She was a fearless warrior with a benign heart. She admonished when required, and consoled when needed. She abstained from pomp and luxury, living a frugal and simple life. During her stay at Adyar, she never sought any special comfort which she could not give to other residents.

She could not tolerate the slightest harm to plants and animals. Birds, squirrels, kittens, dogs, and puppies found in her a reassuring, safe human being. In the end, she was humane to the core. I have had many unique experiences during the past twenty years where I had the good fortune to see the 'Other Radhaji'.

Though not a student of botany, she was thorough with the names of trees and plants in the Adyar Estate. She knew their classification, where they originated, their peculiarities and uses. She could speak with such authority that specialists were amazed at her thorough grasp and knowledge. She could even locate the place where a particular sapling was planted.

In her prime, she could even recall the different varieties of fruit-bearing trees in the estate along with their particular taste.

She insisted on variety of vegetation, for there was unity in diversity. She used to walk through the vast estate often and on the next morning would give a message regarding some plant or tree which needed immediate attention. When the main trunk of the great Banyan tree fell, she worked with missionary zeal in safeguarding the tree and seeking the help of all

the experts and specialists for years to see the entire canopy was made healthy and luscious. To her, even the plucking of a flower or a small bunch of leaves from a plant was not tolerable. I vividly remember her rushing to the spot, almost jumping, when a child lured by the beauty of a hibiscus in full bloom, was about to pluck a flower, and she yelled at the parents: ‘Don’t you keep a watch on the child and tell him not to do such damage?’

Very often I was amazed to observe her in-depth knowledge of every spot in the estate, even minute details, history, and life cycle of different plants, herbs, and trees. She always wanted the estate to have minimum intervention in clearing wild growth or so-called weeds or undergrowth because she said unity in diversity is the law of Nature, and we have no right to destroy even a tiny plant or herb to satisfy our funny notion of modernity or crafted artificiality. Very often I had a chance to walk with her in the estate and on the beach. She used to share so many unworldly things that would flash upon her inward eye, provided we were lucky!

She was a disciplinarian in the real sense of the term. Her daily life bears ample testimony to this. She used to get up early, by about 4.30 a.m., and from that moment until she retired by 9 p.m. there was a clock-like precision in everything she did. Punctuality and total application and involvement in anything she did was her forte — be it friend, relative, worker, or visitor, she was keen on keeping to timings.

Many were even amazed to see Radhaji at her desk within one or two hours after returning from her foreign tours on theosophical work. She did not like to stay in hotels except when there were compelling circumstances. She always preferred to stay in the home of a fellow theosophist, or in a theosophical lodge having minimum comforts. She was interested in a place conducive to her stay and theosophical work. She did not demand anything.

I vividly remember when she was in Sivaganga she gladly stayed in a member’s residence consisting of more than fifteen family members. When asked how she felt, she replied: ‘I could enjoy and relive the graceful and loving atmosphere of the joint-family system.’

She felt uncomfortable when luxury surrounded her. Once Radhaji and I stayed in the residence of a member who is a celebrated philanthropist and an industrialist. The rooms which he arranged for our stay were princely, decorated with fine paintings and persons to attend on. Radhaji said, ‘am uneasy to stay in such a lovely palace-like place’. Then the host asked me to take her to the room where he stayed. This room was spartan, and she remarked: ‘He is the highest taxpayer and has just a mat, water to drink, a few glasses, a phone, and *tulasi* (sacred plant)! Truly he is a man *in* the world, but not *of* the world.’

She spoke and wrote with such precision and exemplary choice of words to convey her ideas. Her choice of words and expressions, be it a talk, article, or message proved to be a work of art with sensitivity. An article written by a very senior member had more than a hundred mistakes. When we told her about the futility of publishing such an article, her reply was: ‘The idea he wants to convey is something remarkable.’

Radhaji would not tolerate mediocrity or crudeness in any form of work, let alone in fine arts. Herself being a perfect dancer, she always wanted only the artists of excellence to entertain the audience in theosophical gatherings, especially at the international Convention. Any discordant note in chanting or rendering of a musical piece would make her furious.

I can vouch for her forgiving nature towards delinquent employees and erring workers provided they realized their mistake and apologized. Behind her terse countenance there was a tender heart. To her, charity had a clear meaning. She was of the firm view that helping boys and girls in their education was the highest form of charity. Our former President Sri Ram and she were interested in the education of girls, and with that in mind they created a charitable trust and were able to shape the destiny of many children.

Radhaji maintained a high sense of dignity in all that she did. Her simple but graceful and elegant way of dressing, the demeanour in her walk, her total listening, deep, measured, and considered comments when required, spoke volumes. When Chennai was struck by the tsunami, and as her residence was close to the beach, I requested her to move to Leadbeater Chambers for a few days, she responded: 'We are all protected.' Those who had the good fortune of being with her and working with her would have had precious moments of unforgettable experiences. It would not be proper to pen such intensely personal experiences.

Radhaji's Watch-Tower notes are the objective views of a Theosophist. She realized there is 'No Other Path to Go', fondly hoped for 'Human Regeneration', and she believed in 'Self-Knowledge'. She believed in Universal Consciousness, Unity and Divinity of Life which is all Truth, Beauty and Goodness. Her writings are in a class by themselves, wherein genuine spiritual seekers can seriously think to take the first step.

On 31 October 2013, around 4.30 p.m., she called me to meet her at her residence. She clasped my hand and said, 'Tonight at 9 p.m., you should meet me if possible. Tomorrow, please be with me. If it is not inconvenient get me some *manna* (porridge-like health drink) and biscuits. Take care of the Convention. Difficulties will be there, you must carry on.' I sensed something unusual. I bought the things which she had asked for and this was delivered to her along with a list of important telephone numbers, by 6 p.m. I had also assured her that I would visit her later at 9 p.m. The other side of life happens without a warning! Just after 9 p.m., when I was about to leave for her home, I had a call informing me of Radhaji's passing away. . . . When I reached her residence I saw her lying peacefully. Has she merged with Eternity? On her table was the *Bhagavadgita*. There was a paper on which a few verses in Sanskrit, from the *Gita*, were scrawled by her. One verse is reproduced below along with the translation:

Yo mam pasyati sarvatra sarvam ca mayi pasyati

tasya 'aham na pranasyami sa ca me na pranasyati

(chapter 6, verse 30)

'He who sees Me in all things, and all beings in Me,
him I will never lose hold, and he shall never lose hold of Me.'

Were the above the last lines pondered over by her? Then, there was the book '*Inner Life*'. There was a benign silence. A soul who tried to live the six *paramitas*, who sacrificed all that she had at the altar of Theosophy and the Theosophical Society, had cast the mortal frame here for a well deserved sojourn there on higher planes to be invigorated again by the Great Ones.

To the question, 'What is your ambition in life?', Radhaji's reply was 'To become as selfless as I can.'