

Interview with Mr S. S. Varma



Mr S. S. Varma in front of the Archives, at Adyar

S. S. Varma (1911-1999) was a distinguished member of the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society in India. He served as Treasurer of the TS at its International Headquarters at Adyar, Madras, India, and also as a member of the Society's General Council and the international Executive Committee. He was also for a period of time Officer-in-Charge of the TS Archives. Mr Varma is the author of three books which present a distinct contribution to Theosophical literature: Yogic Practice – Yama and Niyama (The Theosophical Publishing House, Chennai, India, 1991); Teachings on Discipleship – As outlined in the Mahatma Letters (The Theosophical Publishing House, Chennai, India, 1995); and Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa – An Esoteric Study (Aparna Publishers, Cuttack, Odisha, India, 2017).

The following interview was conducted at Adyar by Pedro Oliveira in 1996. The interview was kindly transcribed by the late Mrs Kusum Satapathy, Varmaji's daughter. We express sincere thanks to Dr Chittaranjan Satapathy for providing a photograph of Varmaji.

We are going to have a conversation with one of the senior most members of the Indian Section of the TS, Shri S. S. Varma. Varmaji: can you tell us something about your childhood?

A. I was born in Manipuri, in 1911. My childhood was spent with my family where everybody, so to speak, showered a lot of care and love on me. But my mother died when I was less than three years old, and I was in the care of my Aunt, who loved me very much and who came from a family with a religious background. So, she gave me a training in ethics and even as a child I was taught verses which told me how to behave and what is good and bad. My father was a member of the TS, a little later, and gradually I learnt from him some elements of Theosophy, not knowing that they were Theosophical, which I learned only afterwards. When I was about 10 years old, Dr. Besant visited my birthplace and, luckily for me, I was selected to present her some flowers. She was very kind and, of course, I remember only that I looked at her very admiringly, and came away. Then, when I was about 11, I used to be very angry; and the anger lasted a long time, through frequent outbursts. But I saw pictures at Mr. Dharma Narayan's place, father of Shri Surendra Narayan. He used to project the pictures of *Man Visible & Invisible*, *Thought Forms* and others and explain what they

were. He showed the picture of a person in great anger and explained that this is how a person looks when he is angry and sometimes this condition may last for more than twenty-four hours. I was horrified to know or see how I looked and since then I started trying to curb my anger. Father gave me some books like 'Life of H.P.B.', 'Life of A.B.'. I read those with great interest. In 1926, my Aunt who was taking care of me fell sick and in 1927 she died. I had a peculiar experience at the time of her death. I felt as if she was visiting me for the last time. She did not speak anything, I did not know that she was dying. But in the morning somehow I had the feeling that it was a farewell visit and I told my father that something has happened. Just in that afternoon we got the telegram that she had passed away that morning.

Then, another incident which gave me a feeling that there is a lot in the invisible world was my visit to the Convention at Benares. Dr. Besant was presiding at the Convention and on the other side, i.e. in the Central Hindu College, an educational Conference was going on. As I went from the Theosophical compound to the other compound, I felt there was a noise this side, outside the TS compound, but there was silence within. I thought it is because there are so many people wandering on the other side. So I stood at the door to see whether it was real. And as I moved the head from side to side, I felt there was some sort of screen shielding the Theosophical compound and dividing the two. When the head was on the Theosophical compound side there was silence. On the other side there was a peculiar buzzing noise. So it was not a physical noise but it was some sort of disturbance and I felt that there is something which is not physical and some quietness, something in the compound in the Theosophical atmosphere at Benares where Dr. Besant was presiding. She was also attending the other conference, but it was not the same atmosphere. So then I prepared my mind in a way and because of the death of my Aunt, I asked my father to give me some books telling one about life after death, karma and reincarnation, and I tried to study them and find out how or why this happens and what does happen to a person after death. He had given me Leadbeater's books and I read them with great interest. But I did not quite understand why such a good person as my Aunt should pass away so quickly.

Q. What was her name?

A. Her name was Smt. Hardevi.

Q. And your Father's name?

A. Shri Prem Bihari.

Q. And if I may ask you – how large was your family?

A. I had three sisters and three brothers, but as at that time it was a joint family, my cousins were also treated like brothers and sisters and we were quite a large number.

Q. This was in Manipuri?

A. Yes.

Q. So your basic education was in Manipuri?

A. Basic education was in Manipuri but for some time I had also gone to Shahjahanpur to stay with my uncle and study there. That was for about 18 months.

Q. Do you have any recollection of when your father joined the Theosophical Society?

A. I don't know. Ever since I started to know anything, he was a member.

Q. Where did you have your High School education?

A. High School I passed from Manipuri. As I said, schooling was mostly at Manipuri but partly at Shahjahanpur also where Uncle and Aunt lived.

Q. You mentioned that the experience during the passing of your Aunt was a very important experience for you.

A. Very important experience.

Q. Which came to you before you could even begin to study Theosophy.

A. Well, that made me study Karma, Reincarnation and Life after Death. Of course at that time, I did not become a member. My father never encouraged me to become a member but he gave me books to read.

Q. What happened to you after completing High School?

A. I went to Agra, to Radha Swami Education Institute, from where I passed Intermediate i.e. 12th class. Then after that I went to Lucknow to study in the B.Sc. class. Then, after studying about one and a half years, I was selected to study in Roorkee College – Civil Engineering. I went there for three years' study.

Q. During this period you had not yet joined the TS yet?

A. No, I joined the TS very late because my father said – 'you go on reading, studying' and I kept on studying Theosophical Books. In fact, much before I joined the Society, father gave me *The Masters and the Path*, which had been originally published in 1925. Soon after it was released he had given me the book to study. I read the book and I asked him whether it was permissible to meditate on the Masters. And since he said there was no objection, I did meditate on the Masters even before I joined the T.S.

Q. So the Theosophical influence was very strong in your life.

A. It was very strong.

Q. But you were concentrating on your studies and preparing yourself for a professional career.

A. Yes.

Q. And what happened to you after completing your Engineering studies?

A. After completing Engineering studies those were days of great unemployment.

Q. Which year was that?

A. I passed in 1932.

Q. That was the time of the Great Depression.

A. The Great Depression was there, I could not get employment. First I got an employment in a Sugar Mill which was being constructed for about two or three months. Then I joined the railways as a student Engineer for some time. I worked there for less than a year. I applied in many places and got a negative reply generally. I was prepared to get that reply. Once from Bird & Co., Calcutta, I got a letter for an interview. I rushed to Calcutta and I was selected. In the beginning, on the first day, they said I should work free as there were two engineers who had passed from England and they had been working for about six months without any pay. So I thought I should also join in that way. I joined, but within a week I found that the design engineer found me almost indispensable. So I told him I will go back and finish my training in the railways. But he didn't want to let me go. He said, 'before the evening comes you must join and you must sign an agreement to work in the Company and I am giving you pay from today'.

Q. And you accepted.

A. I accepted and started getting my pay. Then those two Engineers who had passed from England, they also appealed and they said this is very unfair. And they were also given a contract.

Q. When did you decide to constitute a family?

A. In 1938. That was when I was still serving in the Railways. I had come to the Railways and had been selected to work there. And in 1938 I got married.

Q. So eventually you left Calcutta to resume your work in the Railways.

A. The work was at Simla and Delhi and for three years or so I was moving between Delhi and Simla. Delhi in winter and Simla in summer.

Q. May I ask you how many children came into the world as a result of the marriage?

A. There are five children. Two daughters and three sons, all well settled now.

Q. I understand some of them are in America.

A. One son is in America, in California.

Q. Does Mrs. Sheela, your wife, also come from a Theosophical family?

A. No. She does not come from a Theosophical family, but somehow she had a desire to understand Theosophy and learn about Theosophy. When my first child was about 16 months old, it was one such occasion. It was easy to go for the Benares Convention [of the TS]. She insisted on going. My father agreed and took her to Benares to attend the Convention. And I have always found her very receptive, very co-operative. We have often studied together – books on Theosophy and other religions.

Q. In which year did you actually join the TS?

A. 1939

Q. And where were you living then?

A. In Calcutta.

Q. And how was your involvement with the Society? Did you start immediately to participate in the Lodge work? Did you become an office bearer of the Lodge?

A. No, in the beginning I was only going to attend the meetings. And the meetings, most of them, were in a language I could not understand. But part of it was in English. And still I persisted in going till I moved to Allahabad in 1942. There, of course, the whole work was in English and there I met some very senior members of the Society, like Dr. [I.K.] Taimni, Mr. Prasad; and they encouraged me. They made me take part in the Lodge work. In fact, Dr. Taimni made me give three lectures in the Lodge. I had written them down and somehow he was very happy with those lectures and he showed them even to CJ [C. Jinarajadasa] when he went to Allahabad.

Q. Mr Jinarajadasa was to become the President of the TS in 1946.

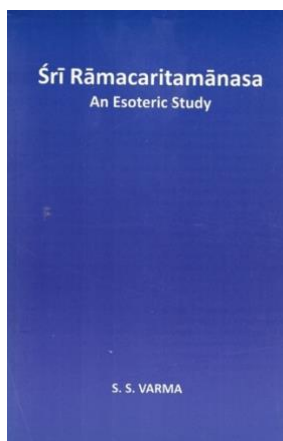
A. Yes.

Q. This introduces very naturally another question: in your whole career – you joined in 1939, we are in 1996, which comprises almost sixty years of membership. What

were the Theosophical leaders, the Theosophical stalwarts, that you met during your time of membership in the TS – you mentioned Dr. Taimni. Can you say something about him? What kind of a person he was?

A. Dr. Taimni, when I met him in the early 1940s, was writing the book – *Self Culture*, and he used to come and discuss the chapters with my father. I was a listener, interested listener mostly, and he had to make those figures which I made for him.

Q. The diagrams.



A. The diagrams. Three diagrams; and he was kind enough later, as I said, to encourage me to do work in the Lodge and to take part in discussions and give talks; and I was fortunate enough to meet a number of leaders at that time. Afterwards Rohit Mehta took over; he used to come to our house. Mr Dharma Narayanji was a constant visitor to the house and a neighbour and he was very kind to me later on. We used to meet often and talk about various religious things. And it was he who gave me a lot of interest in *Rāmacaritamānasa*, saying that this contains Theosophy in abstract form. A person who can understand this well has to know Theosophy.

Q. Who was the person who introduced you to *Rāmacaritamānasa*?

A. Mr. Dharma Narayanji – father of Mr. Surendra Narayan [former Vice-President of the TS].

Q. Did you meet the International President, Dr. G. S. Arundale?

A. I met him. But he did not visit us or come to my place. But I did meet him in the meetings. Later on I had invited Rukmini to our house and she was kind enough to come. Before that CJ had also come. Of course, Rohit Mehta and Sridevi used to come to our house. But the greatest impact on me was that of Sri Ramji [N. Sri Ram].

Q. In which way did he cause this impact? Can you describe it?

A. It is very difficult to describe. It was an experience to sit near him and how it affected one I cannot say, because it was something intangible. He was very kind and one thing that struck me – he was never flurried. One day actually it happened that he was to have tea at our place and it was getting a little late. So the person with him was looking at his watch feeling uneasy and said – ‘we must go’. But NSR [Sri Ram] said, ‘yes I know; but my wife and myself had also to go; so let us take it easy and we shall still be in time’. He waited patiently for everything to finish, for us to lock up the house and go with him to the meeting.

Q. And he was unperturbed?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you have the opportunity to have conversations also with CJ during his stay with you?

A. No, CJ did not stay with me. I had him just for a visit. He took interest in the Mystic Star at Allahabad. I joined the Mystic Star movement. He trained us and he was very particular about every pronunciation. He made us repeat a word half a dozen times till it was correctly spoken.

Q. He was very meticulous.

A. Yes.

Q. You once told me that while with NSR one could feel an atmosphere of saintliness around him, while CJ was a very energetic person who radiated power.

A. That is true. That is the feeling I had when I was with them.

Q. I understand you retired from Government Service in 1969.

A. That's right.

Q. During this time, were you in Delhi or were you in Allahabad before retiring?

A. At the time of retirement I was in Delhi.

Q. So you were taking active part in the work of the Delhi Theosophical Federation?

A. Yes. I had been elected as President of the Lodge several times, in the Federation I was working in various capacities and in different places. In fact one Lodge used to meet at my place.

Q. What happened after your retirement in 1969?

A. After 1969 I went to Lucknow for a short time. Then I got an assignment to go to Tanzania for three and a half years. I went there as an Advisor to the Government on Bridges and then I came back and resumed Theosophical work in Delhi.

Q. During your stay in Tanzania I understand you also took part in Theosophical activities there.

A. Yes. In fact at the time I went there, they were holding meetings only in Gujarati. Then gradually, I started going to Gujarati meetings also, and afterwards they introduced one English meeting and one Gujarati meeting and I took part in them.

Q. After coming back to India and resuming your Theosophical work in Delhi I understand that you also had an opportunity to be acting General Secretary in the Indian Section or Assistant General Secretary, during the time of difficulties there.

A. Yes. There was one year of some difficulty there and there was no real General Secretary. Then Dr. [A.] Kannan was sent there as General Secretary. To help him I was sent there. Although I did not want any position Dr. Kannan insisted and appointed me as Joint General Secretary.

Q. For how long did that last?

A. That lasted only one year before Dr. Agarwal was elected as the General Secretary.

Q. Now, I understand that you came to the convention at Adyar in 1985 and you were planning to stay over to write a book with Shri R.S. Gupta. Can you tell us something about that.

A. Yes. We had decided to write a book on the Mahatma Letters and we had both come here prepared to stay for a month or six weeks, so that we could be together and write that book. But when we came to Adyar, I was told that there was a crisis in the Treasury, and that I should take over as the Treasurer. I said that I did not know much of accounts, but I was told by Mr. Surendra Narayan that I should take over, as there was a lot of general work to be done. I said I can only do it if I have an Assistant Treasurer who knows accounts. Dr. Gupta agreed to help me during that period and then we both decided to stay here. I had about two days to decide and then the President announced it in the General Council meeting that I will take over as Treasurer. Miss Annie Tjio had already resigned and therefore I took over as the Treasurer.

Q. Which was a completely unexpected situation.

A. This was a completely unexpected situation. Then of course we used to stay here and we went by turns to our homes, and brought things to be able to stay here for a year or for longer period.

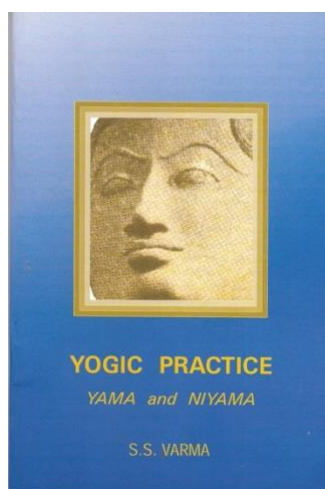
Q. You are now in your eleventh year of residence at Adyar. What do you feel about life at Adyar? What is it like living at Adyar?

A. It is an experience to be here. I have found almost everybody without exception extremely nice. The President and the Vice President have been particularly good and my life has been very pleasant here. The atmosphere is indescribably good and the people here are also very friendly even though there are some differences between

people. But I found that with me, even if officially there is a difference, in private life they are very friendly to me and I found therefore living here to be almost heavenly and it is only with regret that I will go out of this place.

Q. What would you say to the new members who are joining the Society? What would be your advice to them in what concerns making Theosophy something living and not just a theory?

A. There are, as Theosophy presents it, the external side, where we study all about evolution, how the worlds come into being and change, rounds and chains and all that. But in order to make Theosophy a living reality we have to realize that all that is to



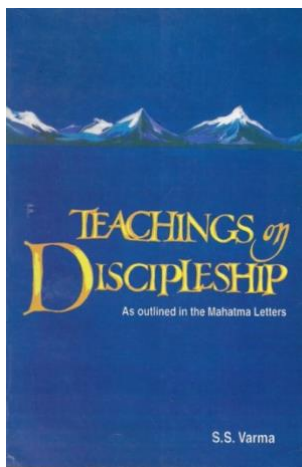
show that there is One Life of which each of us has to realize himself as a part, not as something external to himself. When we read all that generally we have a feeling that we are seeing something outside us. People talk of Brotherhood. We are told that that is the one object which is the most important object, if not the only object that we have to concentrate on. But they seldom realize that this Brotherhood is not so much an external thing which is reflected in our behaviour. Essentially, it is the realization that the individual self is fictitious; it doesn't exist. We are only existing as a part of a whole big life and that life is all pervading. With this idea, if we start living, we can then only be brotherly. Otherwise, brotherliness which people

think of as just good behaviour, is not really Theosophy and those people who come into contact with Theosophy should study all the literature; but this one basic idea that there is One Life should never be lost sight of.

In *The Secret Doctrine* also this comes in the very beginning, that there is One Life only which is manifesting everywhere. So if this idea is always kept in view it will be easier to understand the rest and also to live Theosophy. Quite often people feel they must go out and lecture but they forget that the best lecturing is by living Theosophy and understanding this, that there is one life. When this comes out from within, the whole atmosphere around one changes, which I have said already I could feel in the case of NSR, who probably lived in this light and therefore the whole atmosphere around him was different. And we have to, if we want to make Theosophy a living power, we have to cultivate this one feeling that we are a part of this one whole life and everybody is included in it, high or low. It is felt that if a person is bad according to our thinking he is to be shunned. But we must recognise him as another item or unit where the spark is not yet able to shine and the equipments are being trained to make it express through them. We see the mess that is created when anything great is being constructed. As an engineer, I can see that when there is construction going on there is a lot of mess in the compound but every architect and engineer who can see the final building with his eyes is happy that ultimately it will result in that great structure. Similarly, in every person that spark is trying to come out and when it is able to shine out there will be tremendous vitality and greatness in that unit also.

Q. You have written a very interesting book on Discipleship as a result of your studies in the Mahatma Letters. This has been a lifelong study with you. In the old days of the Theosophical Society, when we read about its history, there was a lot of talk about the Masters, perhaps too much talk. More recently, or after say, the mid-fifties or so, this personal talk about the Masters and stages on the Path and so on ceased to a great extent. Can one come closer to the Teachers or Elder Brothers in this world or this possibility has become more difficult?

A. I think this coming closer to the Teachers has always been difficult, although when those things were materialized, people thought it is something which they can achieve.



And they thought it is the 'I' which achieves them. Actually, my feeling is that it is not something to be achieved; it is something which happens to one. If we live that life then they themselves will overtake us. It is said that when the disciple is ready, the Master appears. So, it is not that we have to try and see that the Master comes; we do something for him to come. But we have to keep on changing ourselves and what we are told about the Masters; we have to learn their outlook. It was a very striking thing which I read in Leadbeater's life. When he came to know, he was struck by their outlook on life; and he said what a wonderful outlook it is. It is this when people think their outlook and their way of thinking is something we have to cultivate, the question of initiations, steps and

materialization of all that goes out of the picture. It is only changing, keep on changing oneself and if there are those steps they will overtake one.

Q. So the challenge of discipleship rests basically with the individual. If the attitude is right the possibility of a closer contact with the Great Ones will be there. But if the attitude is not right there will not be any.

A. Quite right. The closer contact means making oneself as like them as possible. And therefore it is always up to the individual to change himself in that direction. It rests only with the individual to move on that path.

Q. We know that the formation of the Society was not decided by HPB nor by Col. Olcott. They received the directive from the Great Ones to start it. And they inspired the Founders, they inspired the leaders of the Society. Do you feel the Great Ones are still inspiring the Society?

A. It is a very difficult question. It is about what others feel or do and I am not in a position to say whether they are inspiring somebody else or not. But I do feel that if a person really opens up he will get the inspiration.

Q. Thank you very much.