

Membership of the Theosophical Society

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Membership statistics for the past several years reveal a pattern of membership decline in the Theosophical Society. In the Annual Report of the TS for 2004, for example, the total number of members is 31,920. It goes down to 30,171 in 2005 and to 29,287 in 2006. The decline proceeds to 29,014 in 2007 and reaches 28,607 at the end of 2008. As the above numbers are the tallies from membership figures provided by National Sections, Regional Associations, Presidential Agencies and Lodges directly attached to Adyar it becomes clear that the pattern of membership loss is distributed throughout many areas of the Theosophical world.

There are different approaches to the question of membership decline. One of them is to try and make the message of the Society more 'popular' by using strategies to make it more appealing to the public. Sometimes this takes the form of scheduling public talks with 'new age' sounding titles, inviting speakers who may be popular in their own field but who do not necessarily convey the spirit of the Wisdom Teachings or making websites more attractive and informative. However, statistics of individual countries show that in spite of all such strategies membership decline continues unabated for a number of years. A case in point is the Brazilian Section which, in spite of loss of membership, is still the largest Section in Latin America. It is reported that although a number of TS talks in that country have been broadcast on television programmes regularly, with an estimated audience of approximately 6 million people, it did not result in an increase of the Section's membership.

Another approach justifies the loss in membership by attributing it to 'competitors', that is, organizations which may be similar to the TS in their purposes, but which have experienced increase in their popularity due to their promises of quick spiritual fulfillment, a claimed connection with the Masters, so called result-oriented methods of meditation and so forth. A number of such organizations claim, sometimes overtly, that the TS was relevant when it was founded but that now it is nothing but an old and irrelevant institution which is destined to oblivion. Sometimes one hears even TS members saying the same thing!

The question of membership is an important one because the TS was meant to be, from the very beginning, a membership organization. The Founders of the Society, both inner and outer, as well as all its subsequent leaders have made it clear that the true growth of the Theosophical Society is directly connected to the perception, by its members, of its profound purpose. As Brother Sri Ram once remarked, if we conducted a membership campaign and, as a result of which, one million selfish people joined the Society, would that help it in its work? The TS is open to all those who are searching to come into

contact with Theosophy – the Wisdom Teaching – but its work, its future and its usefulness depends on those members who understand the nature of its essential aim.

By leaders of the Society one does not mean only its Presidents. People like Clara Codd and Ianthe Hoskins, for example, never served in that capacity but their contribution to the TS as a whole was an outstanding one. Both of them lectured extensively for several decades and helped countless students and newcomers to understand some of the fundamental principles of Theosophy. Those who knew them could see how the purpose of the TS was alive in them and how that deep understanding and commitment enkindled enthusiasm for the Theosophical cause in those who listened to and met them.

In a letter to Mr Sinnett, Mahatma M. presented, with customary forcefulness and vigour, his view of the central problem afflicting the TS at that time. What he wrote then seems to be as relevant today as it was in 1882:

On the other hand we claim to know more of the secret cause of events than you men of the world do. I say then that it is the vilification and abuse of the founders, the general misconception of the aims and objects of the Society that paralyses its progress — nothing else. There's no want of definitiveness in these objects were they but properly explained. The members would have plenty to do were they to pursue reality with half the fervour they do *mirage*. I am sorry to find you comparing Theosophy to a painted house on the stage whereas in the hands of true philanthropists and theosophists it might become as strong as an impregnable fort. The situation is this: men who join the Society with the one selfish object of reaching power, making occult science their only or even chief aim may as well not join it — they are doomed to disappointment as much as those who commit the mistake of letting them believe that the Society is nothing else. It is just because they preach too much “the Brothers” and too little if at all *Brotherhood* that they fail. How many times had we to repeat, that he who joins the Society with the sole object of coming in contact with us and if not of acquiring at least of assuring himself of the reality of such powers and of our objective existence — was pursuing a mirage? I say again then. It is he alone who has the love of humanity at heart, who is capable of grasping thoroughly the idea of a regenerating practical Brotherhood who is entitled to the possession of our secrets. He alone, such a man — will never misuse his powers, as there will be no fear that he should turn them to selfish ends. A man who places not the good of mankind above his own good is not worthy of becoming our *chela* — he is not worthy of becoming higher in knowledge than his neighbour.

(Letter 33, chronological edition)

Let us examine some of the views presented by him. One of the causes for the paralysis in the progress of the TS is referred to as ‘the general misconception of the aims and objects of the Society’. He adds: ‘There’s no want of definitiveness in these objects were they but properly explained.’ Therefore a clear understanding of our three Objects is very important in our work, whether it be directed to the public or with our own members.

When Mr Sinnett and Mr Hume were putting pressure on the Founders for the TS to concentrate more on psychic phenomena, they were told, in no uncertain terms, that the primary Object of the Society is Universal Brotherhood, not phenomena, for it is only on that foundation that a meaningful exploration of life's mysteries can take place.

Our three Objects remain vitally relevant. The world and its deteriorating conditions show that Universal Brotherhood without distinction is the one true elixir that can bring about a new humanity; an objective exploration of religion, philosophy and science can train the mind to drop absolutistic views and therefore approach Truth in a condition of openness and humility; and a deeper understanding of the hidden dimensions of Nature can lead to the awakening of those faculties in us that will contribute to human progress in the true sense of the term.

The Mahatma also said: 'The members would have plenty to do were they to pursue reality with half the fervour they do *mirage*.' One of the definitions of the word 'mirage' is 'an unrealistic hope or wish that cannot be.' Theosophical literature covers a vast field of research as well as descriptions of universal processes. It also contains levels of metaphysical exposition that sometimes defies understanding. It is only too easy to get lost in the morass of terminologies, classifications and lose sight of what is essential. The other danger, also referred to by the Founders and their Teachers, is that of regarding TS work as a platform for individual self-affirmation of the aggressive kind. We are in the Society to serve its profound aims, not to create fields of influence for our own personal interests.

In another compelling passage of his above mentioned statement, the Master adds:

The situation is this: men who join the Society with the one selfish object of reaching power, making occult science their only or even chief aim may as well not join it — they are doomed to disappointment as much as those who commit the mistake of letting them believe that the Society is nothing else. It is just because they preach too much "the Brothers" and too little if at all *Brotherhood* that they fail.

The TS exists to help humanity at a fundamental level and cause the human consciousness to emerge out of its cocoon of self-interest and spiritual blindness. It is the responsibility of the members who have understood what the TS is all about to make clear to newcomers and those who express interest in membership the deeper implications of the Society's work. For many generations of members, in many countries, the TS acted like a portal to a new world of discovery, exploration, cooperation and enduring inspiration. These qualities cannot be present when selfishness is allowed to take roots.

The Master proceeds to state that which is the sine qua non condition for a member to really help the TS in its work at a deeper level: 'It is he alone who has the love of

humanity at heart, who is capable of grasping thoroughly the idea of a regenerating practical Brotherhood who is entitled to the possession of our secrets.’ Although membership of the TS is open to those who are in sympathy with its Objects and pay the necessary fees, its true meaning can only be appreciated by those who understand its important philanthropic foundations. The inspiration to form the Theosophical Society came from those Great Souls who do not live for themselves. As they themselves have said, they all live for humanity. That was the keynote at the very beginning of the Society, and it remains to this day its sustaining force. The Adepts’ emphasis on Brotherhood was not that of a mere social philanthropic body, adjusted to worldly vicissitudes. It was a ‘regenerating practical Brotherhood’, a united body in which there is constant renewal through the firm and steady shedding of every selfish intention and attitude. Such a body of people, truly united, becomes the vehicle for something much greater than itself, ‘a body over the face of which broods the Spirit from beyond the Great Range.’

The world in 2010 is very different from that of 1882, when Mahatma M. wrote his letter to Mr Sinnett. There has been a technological revolution that has helped to connect the world electronically, particularly through the Internet. There have been also vast advances in many areas of science which have benefited the lives of millions of people. But, alas, human nature in general has not changed. Human beings are still driven by selfish impulses, by cruelty and indifference to other human beings and to animals as well as to Nature.

In disseminating the message and the ethos of the TS the use of modern technology is not only advisable; it is necessary. A number of Sections and other units of the Society in different parts of the world now have websites through which enquirers can come to know their programmes, activities and educational material. However, such technological progress, per se, cannot further the core purpose of our Society. Only truly committed members can by learning to work together in a spirit of cooperation, goodwill and self-effacing dedication. Brother Raja, in a letter to new members, beautifully described the depth and transformative quality of such a commitment:

Our life is composed of reactions to others every minute of the day. Some of these reactions are full of beauty and happiness, as those towards those whom we love and admire; but others cause us much trouble and misery. Whenever you have to react to someone who has troubled you or who is your enemy, then, before your reaction starts, say to yourself: ‘He is my brother.’ You will then find that your reaction towards him will be both more just and charitable. Similarly, try to make the men and women around you less the ciphers they are now. As you sit in a bus or a tram, think of the one by your side as your *brother*. Little by little, as you emphasize this thought, you will be able to discover for yourself many truths of Theosophy that will inspire you to better living and conduct.