

Reminiscences About Adyar

Talk given on 17 February 1967.

THIS morning I said there are very few people now living who have had some personal contact with the President-Founder, Colonel Olcott. I am sorry that just at that moment I did not look at Mr. R. Balfour Clarke, who was present in the hall, because he had the good fortune of having met the Colonel. Just about a month ago another person who was very much attracted to Colonel Olcott, had met and talked to him, passed away in Holland—Professor E.L. Selleger.

My own memory of Adyar, so far as I can reach, goes back to December 1900. I am assured on good authority that as a child I was here with my parents for a few days in the Headquarters estate. I remember the Convention of 1900, at which time the Headquarters estate did not extend beyond the eastern edge of the original coconut grove. This area had been purchased by the Founders in 1882 and was about twenty-six acres in extent. On this occasion in 1900 Dr Besant was the Convention lecturer. She used to lecture convention after convention, each time giving a series of lectures on some subject chosen by her. The subject this time was 'The Avatars' and these lectures were afterwards published in the form of

a book. I remember how crowded the Hall was. The Colonel was in the Chair, and Mrs Besant (as she was called in those days) was expounding this subject with wonderful mastery, in her own inimitable way. People from Madras used to flock to this place just to listen to her. In those days we did not have the kind of transport that is available at present and people had to walk four to six miles in order to come out to these Convention lectures, which were usually held in the mornings. The Hall looked then very much as at present. The four panels on the north wall, with the figures representing the different religions, were there at that time, but not the small symbols near the ceiling pertaining to various past and extinct religions; those were placed there later by Brother Raja when he was Vice-President of the Society.

On this occasion in 1900 Dr Besant was about 53 years of age, a very serious-looking person with graying hair, clad in a kind of loose robe which she generally wore when she lectured. Normally she wore a sari of white Banaras silk, heavily edged with gold. She much appreciated the work of the Banaras craftsmen. At that time she lived in Banaras in the

Mr N. Sri Ram was fifth President of the Theosophical Society.

house called Shanti Kunj which she had built for herself. She had a kind of patriotic attachment to everything pertaining to Banarās, mainly to the Visvanath Temple, the craftsmen and their artistic products, and perhaps even to the Banarās streets! She had a mellifluous voice; she would begin softly and gradually the voice would become stronger and stronger so that, without any microphone, she could be heard clearly in the remotest corner of the Hall. I have been present at meetings where she addressed some three thousand people and all could hear her without difficulty; not perhaps at the beginning when she would begin in a low tone, but very soon. She had a wonderfully vibrant and resonant voice. Lord Edmund Montague, the Secretary of State for India, remarks in his diary on the remarkable quality of her voice. She kept her audience spellbound for exactly one hour. Somehow, without looking at a watch, she would come to a stop just at the end of that period. Everyone would sit and listen, absorbed, and to all of them it was a deep spiritual experience. She used gestures which were dramatic, but they did not seem studied or practised, but natural. Her speech was charged with emotion in those days and she spoke in long, flowing sentences. You notice that style in her early books. Later, she began to speak in a different way, using short, sharp sentences. She herself told me she found the effect was much greater when she used short sentences because the audience could respond to them better. But people enjoyed her old style with the very long and beautifully balanced sentences. At the end of her lecture, Colonel Olcott would rise, put a

shawl round her shoulders, say just a word of thanks, or nothing at all, and she would leave.

In those days she lived at Banarās, as I have said, and she used to come down to Adyar whenever the Convention was held here. At that time there was no accommodation for the delegates who turned up, usually some two to three hundred, and many of them would stay in Madras with friends but others would just come to the Hall, and I remember people spreading their mats on the floor and sleeping there. Then somebody might give an impromptu lecture or some distinguished visitor might come and hold a *conversazione*. That sort of friendly get-together used to take place in those days. I was there with my father and did not understand much of what Dr Besant said; I just listened to the words and was impressed by the whole scene. Nevertheless, I think in some way I drank in the atmosphere and the influence of this place.

As I said, Adyar then was very different from what it is now. There was only the Headquarters building—not the present Bhojanasala or any of the buildings in the later extensions of the original estate, which came into existence after Dr Besant became President.

I saw Colonel Olcott on that occasion—in 1900—and I remember seeing him again at a lecture given by Dr Besant about 1904 or 1905. This lecture was delivered on the lawn west of the first Trilithon. Our Trilithons were brought by Colonel Olcott from some ruined temple not far from Adyar, in order to adorn this place. This particular Trilithon, to which you first came when you walked in from the main gate, used to be situated

near the gate, but with much trouble and considerable skill it was moved to its present site. This lecture was on that lawn where there is the lotus pond at present, and the subject was 'India'. I remember very well Dr Besant speaking to the audience and saying, 'You, my brothers who have the blood of the Rishis in your veins...' and so on. She felt tremendously elated at the thought and it produced a profound effect on the audience. She compared India to a Mother whose head is crowned with the Himalayas, her feet washed by the waters of the Indian Ocean, and the two arms extending to the East and the West.

Colonel Olcott was there before the lecture started, arranging chairs, carpets and so on. He was a portly, venerable figure with a big beard and flowing white hair. On such occasions he used to wear a dark western suit and I remember his watch-chain dangling somewhere down his waist—I do not know whether he could see it, but others could! He commanded the affection of all the delegates who came to the Conventions. He was in the habit of going forward to meet them and embracing them in the North Indian or Parsi style. He greatly enjoyed these occasions. I remember Dr Arundale once saying that when he was comparatively young, Colonel Olcott once was in a gathering like that, and he started the meeting by dancing with Dr Arundale. He did not mind doing that sort of thing in front of the audience on such a formal occasion, because he liked to amuse people. It evidently struck some of the English people as not in the best taste. Mr Sinnett remarked about some of the Colonel's ways in a letter to the Master, and

the Master admits he had his mannerisms and then gives his own opinion about Colonel Olcott—a glowing testimony to his qualities!

I also remember seeing him later at the 1906 Convention when he was already seriously ill. He was upstairs in the Headquarters building and was being nursed by a number of people, among them Dr Besant. I think the suggestion was made that the Colonel could perhaps be brought down to the Hall in a chair, to give a blessing to the delegates present and so that they could look at him. Two or three of the heftiest of the delegates went upstairs and brought him down in a cane and bamboo chair. He was placed on the dais and just murmured a few words which one could not hear because he was too feeble, and then he was taken back upstairs. The next that was heard about the Colonel was when he passed away on February 17th 1907. So I met the Colonel a few times and have some vivid and lively impressions of him.

To come back to Dr Besant, she became President in 1907 and soon after that she began to make various changes here. She extended this whole estate right up to the sea. A number of people offered money with which to purchase our various gardens. First, Blavatsky Gardens, an area of about forty acres with the Bungalow, exactly as it stands at present. A little later, Olcott Gardens and, still later, the area where Parsi Quarters is situated (then called Besant Grove) and, lastly, the Damodar and Besant Gardens, so that very soon the estate increased to some 263 acres.

C.W. Leadbeater came to Adyar in January or February 1909, on Dr Besant's

invitation. Soon after he came they used to have meetings on the roof of Headquarters on five evenings a week. The meetings would begin at 7.00 or 7.15. There were no electric lights at that time and people used to carry hurricane lanterns, as they were called, to walk to these Roof meetings. About the year 1909, Krishnaji and his brother Nitya came under the care of Dr Besant and C.W.L., and they always had these boys sitting with them at these meetings. Mrs Besant would be seated at one end, the two boys next to her, and C.W.L. on the other end. Various written questions were put to them and were answered. Dr Besant's answers were usually brief and to the point, but C.W.L. used to ramble on, if I may say so with great respect to him, and most of what he said is now to be found in the two volumes of *The Inner Life* and other books. I sometimes used to come to the Roof meetings because my father had taken up residence in a house not far from Adyar. He had purchased a bit of land, had a house built, and we stayed there from 1910 onwards for some years. Dr Sivakamu¹ also used to come to some of these meetings. I remember handing in certain questions. One particular question consisted of very many 'ifs'—this being so, that being such and such, this being said, would that not follow? Dr Besant read out the question and said, 'It is a mass of assumptions.' On another occasion when I presented a question, the first remark C.W.L. made was: 'I must congratulate the questioner on his handwriting.' It was probably better than it is now! We all enjoyed these meetings, and they gave an occasion for people to meet and converse.

In those days Dr Besant used to stroll about the grounds in the evenings, enter different houses, find out the requirements of the people, whether they were sufficiently furnished, what was needed to be done, and so on. She started the laundry which is still going on even now, and also a dairy which has since been closed. It was a time of considerable activity. Leadbeater Chambers was built in 1910, I believe, and it was the first or second building to use ferro-concrete instead of bricks, a fact that was remarked upon by the newspapers. At that time, too, the Bhojanasala, the Quadrangle and the T.P.H. building were built. A gentleman who used to live here for some years—a Mr Harvey who later became Lord something or other²—gave the money for the Leadbeater Chambers as well as for the Publishing House.

Dr Besant's Theosophical activities were considerably reduced when she plunged into Indian politics in 1914 and started her newspaper, *New India*. She would leave the Headquarters building every morning punctually at the same time, first at 8.30, later at 9.00 and then at 10.00, and would come back in the evening at 6.30 or 7.00. Some years later Mr K.N. Ramanathan and I had the privilege of working under her for *New India*. Before that, I had been a teacher in different Theosophical Schools. It was very interesting working under her. She was noted for her punctuality and meticulousness in all things. Every proof had to be perfectly corrected, certain words had to be spelt in a certain way. She adopted the system of spelling 'colour' and 'favour' without the 'u'. She did not altogether Americanize the English spell-

ing, but she was a reformer and she reformed a few words and we all had to follow her system. I remember on one occasion she called me to her room—I sat in a room with two or three others—she showed me a proof and asked, 'Who corrected this?' I answered, 'I did.' She remarked, 'You could not have been at your best when doing so.' Then she showed me that the river in the North was given as 'Ganges', whereas it should have been 'Gangā'. She did not like the Anglicizing of Indian names, and Mount Everest always had to be called Gauri Shankar. But I think she was wrong there. There is another mountain called Gauri Shankar, and if we have to give an Indian name to Everest it will have to be something else. Anyhow, we followed her system.

She was methodical in doing things. In the room she occupied when she became President she would sit and work on the *chouki* in her room at the little desk attached to it. When she got tired she would lean back for a few moments, but she was a very steady worker.

New India had various vicissitudes. It was the paper which advocated Home Rule for India without any kind of hedging or qualification, and it was exceedingly popular at that time. I might say, incidentally, that it had a number of leading articles and editorials written by me. But when Dr Besant opposed Gandhi's non-cooperation policy, she became unpopular almost immediately. Within a few months the circulation fell disastrously; every month there was a deficit of several thousand rupees which had to be, and was, met by Dr Besant, with the help of various friends, par-

ticularly D.K. Telang, one of her chief helpers at that time.

New India later became a weekly paper, and then the office was shifted to one wing of the first floor of the T.P.H. building (where Radha used to stick stamps on envelopes, with the help of Vasant and others).³ I used to sit in the same room with Dr Besant and could watch her—not too obviously, of course! She worked very steadily except occasionally when she wanted something she would come to my desk. She did not call me to her; she always went to the desk of the assistant editor or whoever else it might be. That was her particular way and style. The paper closed down about December 1932 when Dr Besant became too feeble to carry on the work.

It was about that time that I had the rare good fortune of being asked to be her private secretary. Because I had that office in her declining years, I had to look after all her affairs, more or less. She tried to do what she could, but as she herself used to say, her memory was not as good as it had been, and she used to say, 'I do not remember well, so I always write things down.' But what she wrote down was added to the heap of papers already there and she would forget to look at the scrap of paper; she was worn out and tired.

Before I became her private secretary Dr Besant did not have one at all, except on a few occasions and for short periods. For many years she had a lady named Miss Willson living with her. Miss Willson used to sit in the anteroom, and all that was expected of her was to announce visitors, if there were any. Dr Besant never used a typist. Once when Dr Arun-

dale brought Maisie Rogers from U.S.A. to help her in that way, Dr Besant put off making use of her for she was not inclined to dictate, but liked to write all her letters in her own beautiful handwriting. All her letters were short, to the point, and since she did not have a secretary or any filing cabinet, most letters received by her were destroyed more or less on the spot.

Her life was extremely simple. She always got up at 4.00 or 4.30. She had certain set ways, among which was having a few people to come and sit with her while she was having her morning coffee at about 6.00. They used to come and sit there every morning, very happy to have the opportunity of meeting her.

Dr Besant could sometimes be quite forbidding. She was always very gracious, and when you went to her she received you with great affection and interest. But if you asked for some of her time, she would say, 'Let the person come in.' Then you would say what you had to say and very briefly she would answer in a sentence or two, and that was the end of the interview. But in some cases she would take great trouble, even with her bad knees and old age, to walk down to the Hall, sit there and talk to the person. One might imagine it was an important person who sought a meeting with her, but often it would be just a poor student who had written a letter saying, 'Dear Mother, I am unable to pay my fees; I require your help.' She did not want the boy to come upstairs nor to send somebody else down, but more often than not she would herself go down, sit and say a few sentences and give the boy the help he wanted. That was her wonderful, beautiful nature. I remember once somebody had written

that his family was in difficult circumstances, and he was expecting some financial help from her. The letter had been put aside and Dr Besant did not attend to the request immediately, but one day she came across this letter. The man was living at Royapettah, some four or five miles from Adyar. She called me and told me to take her car to the man's address saying that he was probably still in need and that I should give him whatever help he needed. Very few people would do that. That indicates something of her nature, which was very, very motherly.

Dr Besant was a very witty person. Once when she was not very well, Dr Srinivasa Murti who attended on her and many people on this estate, came to her and gave her some kind of Indian medicine. She did not believe in allopathic medicines at all and much preferred the Ayurvedic remedies. He used to give her some black stuff which she could put on her toast and eat. But she did not like it and afterwards she cut it into pieces and threw it all into the river. Miss Willson was horrified and asked, 'What are you doing?' to which Dr Besant replied, 'I know what I am doing.' Miss Willson said, 'But the medicine is *good* for you,' and Dr Besant said, 'If it is good for me, it is good for the fishes,' and that disposed of Miss Willson for the moment.

Sometimes she could be quite curt. On her verandah there was a huge old wooden trunk which H.P.B. had brought out from London. (It still sits on that verandah.) A little cooking used to be done for her somewhere on that verandah and the firewood had to be stacked somewhere, so it was kept in H.P.B.'s trunk. One day Miss Willson discovered it

and protested, 'This trunk contains firewood!' She always had a way of raising the pitch of her voice and almost shrieking. Dr Besant said, 'Yes; what about it?' Miss Willson said, 'It is H.P.B.'s box and H.P.B. would be horrified if she saw firewood being kept in her trunk. It is not nice to put firewood in that box.' Dr Besant said, 'But H.P.B. is not here. The firewood is quite clean.' I think that Miss Willson quite often managed to speak in a way which did not fit in with Dr Besant's moods and frankly irritated her.

Dr Besant's servant was from Banaras where she had lived from 1900 to 1907, and this Lakshman had been implicated in a plot. He told me that he had been charged with complicity in a murder and had been put in prison and then discharged. Afterwards, he sought work and Dr Besant took him into her service because she said it would be very difficult for him, with his record, to find work elsewhere. He had a dark beard and used to frighten people by his ways, but he was well-meaning and exceedingly devoted to her. On one occasion she remarked when Brother Raja and I were there, 'He has been with me for forty years; it speaks well for both of us.' That was a remark only Dr Besant could have made.

She had a very beautiful outlook on people and things. So when people say that Dr Besant changed H.P.B.'s Theosophy, that she stated that Mars and Mercury belong to the earth chain, all that kind of talk leaves me perfectly cold. What does it matter whether Mars and Mercury are on the earth chain or on some other chain? That does not seem to me a very serious affair. Even if she made mistakes, the mistakes did not matter.

After all, a person's motives, spirit and attitude seem to me to matter infinitely more than the particular actions he might perform, or the words that he might say.

C.W.L. was very different from Dr Besant. She used to call him a 'crusty Tory'. He was very British and his political views were conservative. He thought that Indians should support the British Government in all its laudable aims, and in due course they would get Dominion status. She was radical, and in some matters revolutionary.

One of Dr Besant's remarkable qualities was the attitude that she must work with anybody who wanted to help her or serve the Society. Her attitude was that since the person wanted to help and serve, he had the right to be given that opportunity, so she would adapt herself to some extent to that person. This is remarkable when you think of all the people with whom she worked at some stage or other of her life—Bradlaugh, Sinnett and others in London, Upendranath Basu and Bhagavan Das in Banaras, B.P. Wadia, C.W.L., Dr C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Dr Arundale and others—all very, very different from one another. Still, she was able to work with every one of them—a wonderful thing. We all have particularities, likes and dislikes, but she more or less had the spirit expressed in Shri Krishna's words: 'By whatever path a man approaches me, I accept him along that path.' She welcomed everybody, was friendly, and really concerned about every one.

As I said, C.W.L. was very different. When Krishnaji and his brother came under his care, all matters pertaining to them had precedence over everything

else. I think he laid down for them a scheme of activities about which Mr Balfour Clarke could say much more than I can. Sea baths, tennis and cycling were important activities of the day, I believe. He felt that the young boys had to build up their health and strength. So they were fed, given exercises and so on; he even looked to every little detail pertaining to their life—the washing, the combing of the hair, the way they dressed, how to use the spoon or fork. Perhaps they did not quite appreciate it at the time and thought they were too much governed and regulated, which young people do not like. I think Krishnaji later made the remark that but for C.W.L. he would have died at an early age.

Later there were Dr Arundale and Brother Raja at Adyar. I need not speak much about them because many of you have memories of them; they have not yet receded into history. Each one of these people was of a special type, different from the others. Krishnaji has been here on the estate off and on at different times. I later became more acquainted with him than in 1910.

Adyar is a very interesting place for

various reasons, among them for the fact that nearly all the well-known and eminent leaders of the Theosophical Society have been here at one time or another. We may think of it as an estate with many beautiful associations, and whatever has been spoken or done in this place has been with a view to the advancement of human beings. One might say something which is not quite correct, but I think that does not so much matter, because all the activities of this place have been actuated by the highest motives—I do not know whether this is making too much of a claim—motives which can commend themselves to all. If we look at the Headquarters Hall, it has been the scene of so many gatherings and meetings through the years. For a person like me who can reminisce because he is much older, there are many memories associated with this place which are full of inspiration and beauty. □

1. Sri Ram's sister.

2. Charles Harvey, later Sir Charles Harvey.

3. Radha is the present President. Vasant is her brother, born on Dr Besant's birthday, and so named Vasant.

The art of living is not in living alone, but also in living and working with others, understanding them and co-operating for any good purpose held in common.

Thoughts for Aspirants, N. Sri Ram