

T. Subba Row, CWL and Esoteric Teachings

Compiled by Pedro Oliveira



T. Subba Row

Since its foundation in 1875, the Theosophical Society attracted to its ranks some unique individuals. They were all intensely individual and yet displayed, in their work for the Society, what St Paul called ‘the gifts of the Spirit’. Perhaps this was an extraordinary combination of inherent talents in their minds and psychological make up and the Society’s platform of enquiry into the timeless Wisdom Teachings, which it popularized as Theosophy.

One of such gifted individuals was T. Subba Row (1856-1890). He was invariably reticent in communicating to others the storehouse of occult knowledge he was in possession of. ‘He lived his occult life alone.’ That is how Col. Henry S. Olcott described one of the aspects of his personality. Subba Row joined the Theosophical Society in April 1882 after having invited the Founders to visit Madras in that month. It was during that visit that they decided to set up the international Headquarters of the Society at Adyar, a suburb of Madras. He was a representative of the Sringeri Math at Madras, a Math established by Adi Shankara in the eighth century which, according to H. P. Blavatsky, had a number of Initiates as its heads. The Sringeri Math is a widely recognized centre for the study and practice of Advaita Vedanta.

Subba Row’s education culminated with him passing the Bachelor of Law examination in Madras, after which he joined the legal firm of Grant and Laing in that city and was enrolled as a Pleader of the High Court in the latter part of 1880. Col. Olcott testifies about the role Subba Row played in the Founders’ decision to settle down at Adyar:

People glibly speak of Madras as “the Benighted Presidency” and as being insufferably hot. The fact is, however, that as regards climate I prefer it above the others, and as to Sanskrit Literature and Aryan Philosophy, it is the most enlightened of the Indian Presidencies; there are more learned Pandits in the villages, and the educated class, as a whole, have been less spoilt by Western education. In Bengal and Bombay there are more

litterateurs of the class of Telang and Bhandarkar, but I cannot recall one equal to T. Subba Row, of Madras, in bright genius for grasping the spirit of the Ancient Wisdom. And his being at Madras was one of the causes of our fixing upon that Presidency town for our official residence. Although he is dead and gone, yet we have never regretted our choice, for Adyar is a sort of paradise. (*Old Diary Leaves*)

The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett contains two direct references to Subba Row which make it clear his status as a pupil of the Masters as well as his depth of occult knowledge:

Poor Subba Row is “in a fix” — that is why he does not answer you. On one hand he has the indomitable H.P.B. who plagues Morya’s life to *reward* you and M. himself who would if he could gratify your aspirations; on the other he encounters the impassable Chinese wall of rules and *Law*. Believe me, good friend, learn what you can under the circumstances — to viz. — the *philosophy* of the phenomena and our doctrines on Cosmogony, inner man, etc. This Subba Row will help you to learn, though his terms — he being an initiated Brahmin and holding to the *Brahmanical* esoteric teaching — will be different from those of the “Arhat Buddhist” terminology. But essentially both are the same — *identical* in fact. (Letter 76, third edition)

I do not know Subba Rao — who is a pupil of M. At least — he knows very little of me. Yet I know, he will *never* consent to come to Simla. But if ordered by Morya will teach from Madras, i.e., correct the MSS. as M. did, comment upon them, answer questions, and be very, *very* useful. He has a perfect reverence and adoration for — H.P.B. (Letter 17, third edition)

In a letter to V. V. Sivavadhanulu Garu, dated 1 July 1883, Subba Row shares his insight on the work before the Theosophical Society besides giving some personal advice:

Now I have dealt with all your questions. My dear friend, do not take a desponding view of the matter. I can give you my assurance that occult science and the Theosophical Society have got some basis of truth to stand upon. Be calm and composed; and your difficulties will disappear in course of time. I send you a small book by book-post today as a present. It is dictated by an Initiate to an English lady – the daughter of an eminent English poet – in England. It deserves careful study, and you will no doubt be profited by it.

In the December 1932 issue of *The Theosophist* C. Jinarajadasa describes the circumstances in which HPB wanted Subba Row to be associated with her in the production of *The Secret Doctrine*. The title page which was circulated in 1884 describes *The Secret Doctrine* as a “new version of *Isis Unveiled*” and says that its author, H. P. Blavatsky, would be assisted by “T. Subba Row Garu, B.A., B.L., F.T.S., Councillor of the Theosophical Society and Secretary of its Madras Branch”. Jinarajadasa writes:

In fact, the draft of the First Volume, which is being reprinted in THE THEOSOPHIST, was sent by her in manuscript to Swami Subba Row for his opinion. His judgment was a disappointment to H.P.B., because he pointed out how the presentation was not only

diffused but chaotic. This adverse judgment, however, forced H.P.B. to begin over again, and we have to congratulate ourselves that Swami Subba Row's discernment was not only right but proved to be of great service to Theosophists.

In a letter to Col. Olcott (24 February 1888) HPB informs him that she had heard from Tookaram Tatya, a respected member of the TS in India at that time and a friend of Subba Row, that he [Subba Row] would help [with *The Secret Doctrine*] "provided I took out from it every reference to the Masters!"

C. W. Leadbeater arrived at Adyar in December 1884, accompanied by HPB and Mr and Mrs Cooper-Oakley. He had received, through HPB, a letter with direct instructions from Mahatma K.H. for him to go to Adyar. This he did after resigning his position in the Parish Church of Bramshott, Liphook, Hants. In the same letter the Master also declared him his "new Chela" or disciple.



C. W. Leadbeater at Adyar, 1885

In *Old Diary Leaves*, Series Three, Col. Olcott records how active CWL was in Madras soon after his arrival. The title of that chapter in the book is very telling: The Coulomb Missionary Conspiracy. Sections and members of the TS in various countries – including some newspapers in Madras – were rallying behind HPB in face of the accusations leveled against by the Coulombs and the Christian Missionaries in Madras, which were incorporated in the infamous Hodgson Report of the Society for Psychic Research in London. One of the accusations was that she had written the Mahatma Letters. Col. Olcott writes:

Her reception at Madras on her return [from Europe] was even more tumultuously joyous than mine had been. She was met at the pier by a large Committee, garlanded, along with her party of fellow-travellers, and escorted in procession to Pachiappah's Hall, where an assemblage that crowded the place to suffocation was waiting. They rose to their feet and gave vent to their feelings in a roar of cheers and vivas, as she slowly walked through the press to the platform, her hand nervously gripping my arm, her mouth set like iron, her eyes full of glad light and almost swimming in tears of joy. The newcomers from London received each a separate ovation also.

When the outburst of cheering at the end had somewhat subsided, H.P.B. made her first and, so far as I know, only speech from a public platform. She said that "of all the letters published, not a single one, as it stood, had been written by her. She would deny them all

in toto . . . she would be the greatest fool in the world to commit herself so that she might be fairly accused of such vile, disgusting things As for her accusers, she and the Colonel had treated them with all possible kindness, and what should she say of their going over to the enemy's camp, when her back was turned, and selling her like Judas Iscariot? She had not done anything against India of which she should be ashamed, and she was determined to work for India while there was health in her". (Report in the Madras Mail.)

Other speeches were made by Mrs. Cooper-Oakley, Mr. Leadbeater, and myself, which were vehemently applauded, and the presentation of garlands and bouquets to H.P.B. and the rest of us terminated the proceedings.

CWL did not lose any time in joining the campaign for HPB's defense. Col. Olcott reports:

H.P.B. came back fully determined to prosecute the Coulombs and the Missionaries; she had so declared in London and so wrote me from Cairo, where she had stopped some time to collect testimony about the antecedents of the Coulombs. From thence Mr. Leadbeater, then an Anglican curate, or clerk in Holy Orders, wrote to the *Indian Mirror* (issue of December 16) about what he and the others had discovered—facts certainly not much to the credit of these champions of "public morals". He says that the information, derived from the members of Mr. Coulomb's own family, showed that his (Mr. C.'s) wife, formerly a Miss Emma Cutting, had been employed for a short time as governess in the family of S . . . Pasha "but was expelled from his household upon the discovery that she was endeavoring to instil vicious ideas into the minds of her charge"; that she pretended to be able to see clairvoyantly buried treasures; that several were induced to dig where she told them, but discovered nothing save once, when they found some doubloons—which a little girl had seen her place in the hole the night before. Mr. Leadbeater further says that he was assured by Mr. Gregoire d'Elias, Vice-Chancellor of the Russian Legation at Cairo that he knows Mme. Blavatsky intimately, and saw her daily during her (former) stay there, and "esteems her most highly, and has never till now heard the slightest reflection on her moral character".

Another important development during CWL's journey to India happened in Colombo, Ceylon, on 17 December 1884, as Col. Olcott describes:

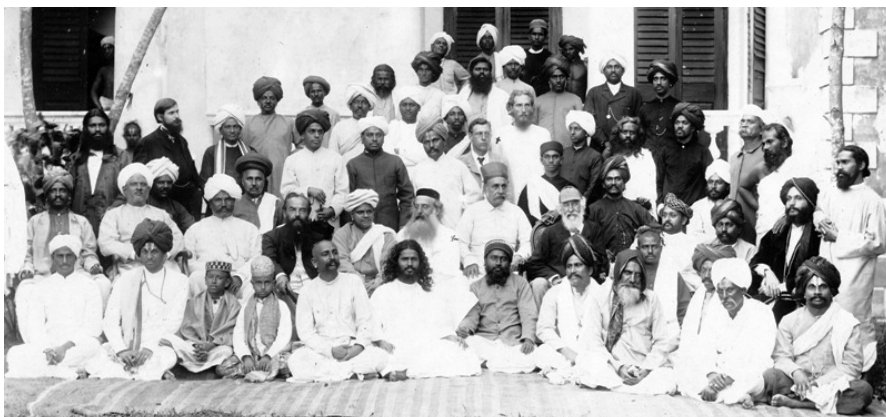
While the party were in Colombo, en route for Madras, an interesting episode occurred. The Rev. Mr. Leadbeater, with H.P.B. and myself acting as sponsors, "took Pansil" from the High Priest Sumangala and Rev. Amaramoli, in the presence of a crowded audience. This was the first instance of a Christian clergyman having publicly declared himself a follower of the Lord Buddha, and the sensation caused by it may be easily imagined.



H. S. Olcott and Ven. H. Sumangala

In the first edition of *Esoteric Writings* by T. Subba Row, published in 1895, the compiler, Tookaram Tatya, declares:

Besides these articles, we are in possession of several notes of a miscellaneous character, regarding the private instructions given by Mr. T. Subba Row to the “chosen few” who had the good fortune to be in close contact with him. But we are sorry to say that they are incomplete, and were given by him only under the pledge of secrecy. It has, therefore, been thought desirable not to publish them.



CWL at the 1885 Convention of the TS at Adyar, Madras. T. Subba Row is seen seated next to Col. Olcott.

In the book *Damodar and the Pioneers of the Theosophical Movement*, compiled and annotated by Sven Eek, from the Point Loma Theosophical Society, it is stated on p. 671:

Subba Row did have a group of pupils or personal friends who as the “chosen few” were given private instruction. Among them were Dr. S. Subramania Iyer, C. W. Leadbeater, A. J. Cooper-Oakley and Dr. Neil Cooke. Tookaram Tatya, in the Preface to

the first edition of *Esoteric Writings of T. Subba Row*, explains that these notes were written under the seal of secrecy and that in consequence he did not feel justified in publishing them. In a second edition published by The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, these notes have been printed. Dr. S. Subramania Iyer permitted C. Jinarajadasa, later President of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, to make a copy of the notes for the purpose of eventual publication. In 1925, C. Jinarajadasa discovered another copy of the notes in the archives of the Welsh Section, which is more complete. This copy says: "From short-hand notes of what Subba Row told us 12 December 1886."

Subba Row's Esoteric Teachings comprise Section VII of the book *Esoteric Writings* by T. Subba Row in its most recent edition. Contents of this section include First Ray in Buddhism, Incarnation and Religions, Sacrifice and Rays, Trinity and Centres in the Body, Cakrams and Rays, a Letter to V. V. Sivavadhanulu Garu, and Women Adepts. Under the last topic Subba Row elaborates his understanding of the Kundalini force:

In practising pranayamam, try to concentrate your mind in your heart and imagine yourself in it as if your consciousness was all focused there. Pronunciation of the word OM seems to rouse up the air in the lungs and send it up to the throat. If kundalinī goes up into your head, it may bring you the elixir of life; if it remains below, it does nothing. It opens a passage in susumna and cleans and purifies the same. When it gets into your head, you increase your vitality, and it draws vital electricity from the sun into your head.

In the case of one given to sexual irregularity, he will never be able to rouse it up. When a man's mind is distracted by worry, excitement, overwork, etc., he will never be able to rouse it up. The greatest danger from the elementals comes when you have aroused kundalinī. They at once notice the centre of disturbance that has been created, and begin to congregate for the purpose of examining the individual who has set it up, and then sometimes you may see them.

In his little book *How Theosophy Came to Me*, C. W. Leadbeater describes the circumstances of his initial development of clairvoyance:

One day, however, when the Master Kuthumi honoured me with a visit, He asked me whether I had ever attempted a certain kind of meditation connected with the development of the mysterious power called *kundalini*. I had of course heard of that power, but knew very little about it, and at any rate supposed it to be absolutely out of reach for Western people. However, He recommended me to make a few efforts along certain lines, which He pledged me not to divulge to anyone else except with His direct authorization, and told me that He would Himself watch over those efforts to see that no danger should ensue.

Naturally I took the hint, and worked away steadily, and I think I may say intensely, at that particular kind of meditation day after day. I must admit that it was very hard work and sometimes distinctly painful, but of course I persevered, and in due course began to achieve

the results that I had been led to expect. Certain channels had to be opened and certain partitions broken down; I was told that forty days was a fair estimate of the average time required if the effort was really energetic and persevering. I worked at it for forty-two days, and seemed to myself to be on the brink of the final victory, when the Master Himself intervened and performed the final act of breaking through which completed the process, and enabled me thereafter to use astral sight while still retaining full consciousness in the physical body—which is equivalent to saying that the astral consciousness and memory became continuous whether the physical body was awake or asleep. I was given to understand that my own effort would have enabled me to break through in twenty-four hours longer, but that the Master interfered because He wished to employ me at once in a certain piece of work.

On the physical plane our great pandit Swami T. Subba Rao often did me the honour of driving over to the Headquarters in order to take part in the instruction and testing, and I feel that I can never be grateful enough for all the help that these two great people [Subba Rao and Master Djwal Kul] gave me at this critical stage of my life.

This process often had to be many times repeated before my mentor was satisfied. The pupil has to be tested in all sorts of ways and under all conceivable conditions; indeed, towards the end of the tuition sportive nature-spirits are specially called in and ordered in every way possible to endeavour to confuse or mislead the seer. Unquestionably it is hard work, and the strain which it imposes is, I suppose, about as great as a human being can safely endure; but the result achieved is assuredly far more than worth while, for it leads directly up to the union of the lower and the higher self and produces an utter certainty of knowledge based upon experience which no future happenings can ever shake.

His clairvoyant investigations went on to produce books of wide ranging appeal which brought many thousands of people in contact with the uplifting teachings of Theosophy. They include *The Astral Plane*, *Thought-Forms* (with Annie Besant), *Man, Visible and Invisible*, *The Science of the Sacraments*, *The Masters and the Path*, *Hidden Life in Freemasonry*, *The Inner Life*, *The Chakras* and *The Hidden Side of Things*, among several others.

N. Sri Ram, the fifth President of the Theosophical Society, may have alluded to the key of CWL success as a Theosophical worker when he said in a Roof talk given on 20 March 1953 at Adyar:

CWL came to Adyar with no expectations whatever of occult advancement. He came in attitude of true dedication, hoping to find some work to do here. I think he had the idea that probably he would have to stick stamps on envelopes or sweep the rooms. In those days Theosophists had very little money and Adyar did not have such a staff of sweepers and servants as at present. He anticipated quite a humble role as a worker here; expecting nothing, he gained all. That is a very wonderful and significant point.



H. P. Blavatsky in London, 1884

Perhaps HPB was not wrong about what she said to the young CWL when she first met him in London, in 1884, after he had written a letter to the spiritualistic journal *Light* in defense of Theosophy: 'I don't think much of the clergy, for I find most of them hypocritical, bigoted and stupid; but that was a brave action, and I thank you for it. You have made a good beginning; perhaps you may do something yet.'