

Boris de Zirkoff on Subba Row



Tributes to Tallapragada Subba Row Garu, learned Occultist and Advaita of the Esoteric faith.

By Boris de Zirkoff.

From *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (COMPILER'S NOTES) V pp. 267-72.

SUBBA ROW GARU WAS A VEDANTIN of the Niyoga caste of the Smārta (Advaita) Brāhmanas. He was born at Cocanāda, July 6th, 1856. His native country was the Godāvārī District on the Coromāndel Coast of India. His vernacular tongue was Telugu. His grandfather was the Sheristādār of the District, and his maternal uncle was Diwan (Prime Minister) to the Rājah of Pithāpuram. His father died when he was but six months old, and his uncle brought him up. He attended the Cocanāda Hindū School, where he showed no unusual talents. After passing his matriculation examination at that school, he went in 1872 to the Madras Presidency College, where he showed great brilliancy in his studies and won his B.A. in 1876 at the top of his class.

Later in the same year, Sir T. Mādhava Row, then Diwan of Baroda, offered him the position of Registrar of the High Court in that State, where Subba Row remained for about a year, returning thence to Madras, where he passed his B.L. examination. Having chosen the law as his profession, he served his apprenticeship under Messrs. Grant and Laing, and was enrolled a Vakil (Pleader) of the High Court in the latter part of 1880. His practice became very lucrative, and probably would have continued to bring him a good income, had he not given most of his attention to philosophy, drawn to it, as he told Col. Olcott, by an irresistible attraction. His brilliant mental ability is well illustrated by the fact that he successfully passed an examination in geology for the Statutory Civil Service in 1885, though this was a new subject to him and he had only one week to prepare himself.

Subba Row gave no early signs of possessing any mystical knowledge and even Sir T. Mādhava Row did not notice any such while he was serving under him at Baroda. Col. H.S. Olcott writes:

I particularly questioned his mother on this point, and she told me that her son first talked metaphysics after forming a connection with the Founders of the Theosophical Society: a connection which began with a correspondence between himself and H.P.B. and Dāmodar, and became personal after our meeting him, in 1882, at Madras. It was as though a storehouse of occult experience, long forgotten, had been suddenly opened to him; recollection of his last preceding birth came in upon him; he recognised his Guru, and thenceforward held intercourse with him and other Mahatmas; with some, personally at our Headquarters, with others elsewhere and by correspondence. He told his mother that H.P.B. was a great Yogi, and that he had seen many strange phenomena

in her presence. His stored up knowledge of Sanskrit literature came back to him, and his brother-in-law told me that if you would recite any verse of *Gītā*, *Brāhma-Sūtras* or *Upanishads*, he could at once tell you whence it was taken and in what connection employed. Those who had the fortune to hear his lectures on *Bhagavad-Gītā* before the T.S. Convention of 1886 at Adyar, can well believe this so perfect seemed his mastery of that peerless work. . . . As a conversationalist he was most brilliant and interesting; an afternoon's sitting with him was as edifying as the reading of a solid book. But this mystical side of his character he showed only to kindred souls. What may seem strange to some is the fact that, while he was obedient as a child to his mother in worldly affairs, he was strangely reticent to her, as he was to all his relatives and ordinary acquaintances, about spiritual matters. His constant answer to her importunities for occult instruction was that he "dared not reveal any of the secrets entrusted to him by his Guru." *He lived his occult life alone.* That he was habitually so reserved, gives the more weight to the confidential statements he made to the members of his own household.¹

H.P. Blavatsky and Subba Row were pupils of the same Adept, Master M. As evidence of the very high esteem that Blavatsky had for Subba Row's occult knowledge, we might recall her editorial remark² to the effect that

. . . we know of no better authority in INDIA in anything, concerning the esotericism of the Advaita philosophy

than Subba Row. It should also be remembered that she associated his name with her own on the printed announcement of the forthcoming publication of *The Secret Doctrine* which appeared on several occasions in the pages of *The Theosophist* in 1884. At the time, her book was to be:

A New Version of *Isis Unveiled*. With a New Arrangement of the Matter, Large and Important Additions, and Copious Notes and Commentaries.

As she wrote herself to A. P. Sinnett, in the early part of 1884:

And now the outcome of it is, that I, crippled down and half dead, am to sit up nights again and rewrite the whole of *Isis Unveiled*, calling it *The Secret Doctrine* and making three if not four volumes out of the original two, Subba Row helping me and writing most of the commentaries and explanations.³

This original plan, however, did not materialize. Later, after H.P. Blavatsky had received from Master M., on January 9th, 1885, a plan for *The Secret Doctrine*, and had worked on it for quite some time, she sent portions of the MSS. to Subba Row for his opinion and corrections. This was in 1886, when she was in Germany. His judgment was a disappointment to H.P. Blavatsky, because he found the draft both diffuse and chaotic. This forced Blavatsky to begin all over again, and may have been partially instrumental in producing a grander and more magnificent text.

¹ *The Theosophist*, Vol. XI, July 1890, pp. 577-78

² *ibid.*, Vol. IV, February 1883, p. 118

³ *Letters of H.P.B. to A.P. Sinnett*, p. 64

Approximately at this time, differences arose between Subba Row and H.P. Blavatsky, mainly on what would appear to be minor points of a philosophical kind, connected primarily with the classification of human principles. While it is not possible to state anything positive in connection with this controversy, there is sufficient evidence to show that the two variants of the teachings concerning the principles were presented in the pages of *The Theosophist* by order of Master M., who, as will be remembered, was the Teacher of both H.P. Blavatsky and Subba Row; and that this so-called controversy was to a very large extent a “put up job.”

However, even if this be true, and we think it is, there remains another, and much more valid reason, for misunderstanding between the two. We must bear in mind that Subba Row was a most conservative and rigid Brāhmana, an initiate into the more esoteric aspect of the ancient Brāhmanical teachings. He was greatly disturbed by the vulgar profanation of the Masters’ names which had then taken place, and, as a Brāhmana, he strongly disapproved the fact that H.P. Blavatsky revealed to the public some of the inner meanings of the Hindu Scriptures, concealed until then in the secrecy of the inner temples. It is probable that he overlooked the fact that in doing so Blavatsky obeyed her superiors, who were Subba Row’s superiors as well.

That this should be done by a woman of European descent was another fact difficult for a rigid Brāhmana to accept. Hence the inner conflict within Subba Row’s mind and heart, a conflict which, to judge by outward circumstances at least, brought about his temporary withdrawal from active participation in the affairs of The Theosophical Society. Writing to Mrs. and Miss Arundale, on June 16th, 1885, H.P. Blavatsky says:

Such as Subba Row — uncompromising *initiated* Brahmins, will never reveal — even that which they are permitted to. They hate too much Europeans for it. Has he not gravely given out to Mr. and Mrs. C[oooper] O[akley] that I was henceforth “a shell deserted and abandoned by the Masters”? When I took him for it to task, he answered:

You have been guilty of the most terrible of crimes. You have given out secrets of Occultism — the most sacred and the most hidden. Rather *that you should be sacrificed* than that which was never meant for European minds. People *had too much faith in you*. It was time to throw doubt into their minds. Otherwise they should have pumped *out of you all that you know*.

And he is now acting on that principle.¹

It is important to bear in mind that in spite of his attitude towards H.P. Blavatsky at this later period, Subba Row had not the least doubt that Blavatsky possessed occult power and knowledge, and that she was in constant touch with the Adepts. Blavatsky’s occult integrity and the validity of her teachings were at no time doubted by Subba Row. This endorsement by an orthodox Brāhmana is of immense importance.

Subba Row, as a representative, at Madras, of the Sringeri Matham, had considerable influence among the orthodox Hindūs. Therefore his attitude towards H.P. Bla-

¹ *Letters of H.P.B. to A.P. Sinnett*, pp. 95-96

vatsky did have a profound effect on many minds, to the distress of those who remained faithful to her.

In 1888, Subba Row withdrew from The Theosophical Society. Very soon after this a painful illness descended upon him. The cause of this affliction was unknown. He died in 1890, only 34 years of age.

Regarding this, Col. Olcott writes as follows:

On the 3rd of June I visited T. Subba Rao at his request and mesmerized him. He was in a dreadful state, his body covered with boils and blisters from crown to sole, as the result of blood poisoning from some mysterious cause. He could not find it in anything that he had eaten or drank, and so concluded that it must be due to the malevolent action of elementals, whose animosity he had aroused by some ceremonies he had performed for the benefit of his wife. This was my own impression, for I felt the uncanny influence about him as soon as I approached. Knowing him for the learned occultist that he was, a person highly appreciated by H.P.B., and the author of a course of superb lectures on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, I was inexpressibly shocked to see him in such a physical state. Although my mesmeric treatment of him did not save his life, it gave him so much strength that he was able to be moved to another house, and when I saw him ten days later he seemed convalescent, the improvement dating, as he told me, from the date of the treatment. The change for the better was, however, only temporary, for he died during the night of the 24th of the same month, and was cremated at 9 on the following morning. From members of his family I obtained some interesting particulars. At noon on the 24th he told those about him that his Guru called him to come, he was going to die, he was now about beginning his *tapas* (mystical invocation), and he did not wish to be disturbed. From that time on he spoke to no one. . . . ¹

The circumstances involved in the passing of T. Subba Row seem to point to some unexpended Karmic debt which he had to meet and overcome before proceeding further along the path of enlightenment.

The only work of T. Subba Row's which stands as a unity is his series of Lectures entitled *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gītā*. The introductory lecture of this series was given by him at the Anniversary Convention at Adyar, December, 1885, and was published in *The Theosophist*, Vol. VII, No. 77, February 1886, pp. 281-85. The four actual lectures were delivered a year later, namely, at the Anniversary Convention at Adyar, December 27-31st, 1886. They appeared originally in *The Theosophist*, Vol. VIII, February, March, April and July, 1887. They were published in book-form by Tookaram Tatya, Bombay, 1888, though some omissions occur in this edition. The best edition of these Lectures is the one published by Theosophical University Press, Point Loma, Calif., 1934, which incorporates corrections in the text which Subba Row himself considered necessary at the time. ²

¹ *Old Diary Leaves*, IV, pp. 234-35

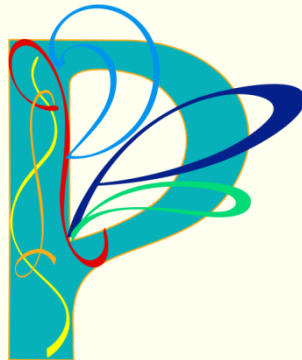
² See *The Theosophist*, Vol. VIII, May 1887, p. 511

T. Subba Row wrote a great many invaluable articles and essays for *The Theosophist*, some of which were, no doubt, inspired by his Teacher. To some of them H.P. Blavatsky appended valuable footnotes and comments which are to be found in their correct chronological order in the present series of volumes. Soon after his death, these scattered writings were collected together by Tookaram Tatya, and published by the Bombay Theosophical Publication Fund, under the title of *Esoteric Writings of T. Subba Row*.¹

In his obituary notice of Subba Row, Col. H.S. Olcott wrote as follows:

Between Subba Rao, H.P. Blavatsky, Dāmodar, and myself there was a close friendship. He was chiefly instrumental in having us invited to visit Madras in 1882, and in inducing us to choose this city as the permanent Headquarters of the Theosophical Society. Subba Rao was in confidential understanding with us about Dāmodar's mystical pilgrimage towards the north, and more than a year after the latter crossed into Tibet he wrote him about himself and his plans. Subba Rao told me of this long ago, and reverted to the subject the other day at one of my visits to his sick-bed.²

While recognizing the subtle dangers which exist on the path of the true occultist, and the fact that T. Subba Row, in spite of his great advance along occult lines, fell prey to some of them, he undoubtedly was one of the most valuable workers of the early Theosophical Movement through whose mind certain teachings of the Adepts were delivered parallel with those coming through H.P. Blavatsky, until such time when their paths appeared temporarily to diverge.³



¹ Bombay 1895; rev. and enl. ed., Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, 1931

² *The Theosophist*, Vol. XI, July, 1890, pp. 577-78

³ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (COMPILER'S NOTES) pp. 267-72

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