

# A LONELY DISCIPLE

Monograph on T. Subba Row, 1856-90



N.C. Ramanujachary

T. SUBBA ROW, an outstanding figure in the early days of the Theosophical Society, was highly respected for his wide-ranging erudition and knowledge of esoteric philosophy and practice. In addition to many articles published in *The Theosophist*, his published works include:

*The Philosophy of the Bhagavad-gītā*  
*Notes on the Bhagavad-gītā*  
*Esoteric Writings*

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## A LONELY DISCIPLE

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*(A monograph on T. Subba Row 1856-90)*

N. C. RAMANUJACHARY

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**DEDICATED**  
to the Master of the Wisdom  
who inspired and taught  
T. Subba Row

*Weed out all error with a  
strong hand. You must help  
yourselves first and when  
you do so other help will  
soon follow.\**

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## Foreword

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**T.** Subba Row was an outstanding figure in the Theosophical Society for a short time after the Founders, Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott, came to India. As this biographical account shows, he did not remain long in the Theosophical Society, and died when he was as yet young. But such was his erudition and occult knowledge that he played an important role during the formative years of the Society. His speeches and writings contained in two publications, *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita* and *Esoteric Writings*, strike the reader even today by their range and depth.

Sri N.C Ramanujachary has rendered commendable service by gathering here the fragmentary information available about Subba Row. It is to be hoped that this biographical outline will stimulate the reader to delve into the above-mentioned writings of Subba Row.

**RADHA BURNIER**

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## Contents

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Foreword	... v
Prologue	... ix
T. Subba Row, a Member of the Theosophical Society	... 1
T. Subba Row's Literary Attainments	... 9
T. Subba Row's Mystic Practices	... 20
A Teacher who would not Teach	... 26
T. Subba Row and Madame Blavatsky	... 35
T. Subba Row and the Secret Doctrine	... 47
The T.Subba Row Medal	... 53
Epilogue	... 56
Chronology of Events	... 58

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## Prologue

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**T**HE early history of the theosophical movement in India has certain names interwoven with it. One is that of T. Subba Row affectionately and respectfully known as 'Swami Subba Row'. He was instrumental in inviting the founders of the Theosophical Society to India and in locating the world headquarters at Adyar. Coming from a Telugu speaking Brāhman family resident in the Godavari district of the erstwhile Madras Presidency, he was well versed in oriental learning, and well read in English which was essential for success in public life. In fact he was a successful advocate practising in the City of Madras.

From the moment he became familiar with the theosophical movement he found himself at one with it, coming into close association with the founders and their activities, until he later dropped away from formal membership. His withdrawal was due to serious differences with Madame Blavatsky over philosophical questions

and certain matters of policy; but all this did not diminish the contribution he made to theosophical knowledge. His writings continue to be quoted with respect. Even though he did not collaborate in writing *The Secret Doctrine*, as originally proposed, his influence in occult matters was too great to be overlooked. It may be argued that what HPB wrote on Hindu philosophical doctrines has as a background the knowledge which Subba Row brought from the Srīngagiri school of the *Tāraka Rāja Yoga* system of Vedānta philosophy.

Subba Row edited the journal of the Theosophical Society for some time, was on various committees including the Literary and the Executive, and was therefore associated with many policy decisions of the period. When the Society was faced with such crises as the Coulomb conspiracy and the investigations of the Society for Psychological Research, Subba Row thought it fit to withdraw from the active scene lest the names of the Masters of the Wisdom be desecrated. His feeling that Madame Blavatsky 'revealed too much for the profane' grew stronger and he set himself against her before she left Adyar never to return.

'Do the Masters exist?' was a question that exercised the general membership in the early

days of the Theosophical Society. Though a number of intellectuals wavered on this issue, Subba Row was not one of them. For him the Masters did exist, but their existence was not to be debated. As this view is now predominant among the present generation of Theosophists, Subba Row may be regarded as a forerunner in this respect.

Many upheavals and currents and cross currents have affected the Theosophical Society through the years. But its stress on fundamentals such as the unity of life and the spiritual regeneration of humanity continue to keep it on firm foundations and gain the respect of the public. One of the contributory factors was the standing and sincerity of men like Subba Row.

Not much biographical data about Subba Row and his family are recorded. We know that before his death he permitted his young wife to adopt a boy, which she did. But as ill luck would have it, this boy, Bhaskara Timmaraju (the son of Siva Row, Subba Row's elder brother) also died at the young age of sixteen and his wife Seetha Mahalakshamma adopted her brother's son Moortiraju and renamed him Subba Row. Happily, this Subba Row, mechanical engineer by profession, grandson by adoption of our principal character, lives with his

wife and two sons at Eluru, a district town of Andhra Pradesh State, looking after the family properties and business. He is well disposed towards the Theosophical Society and is a member.

An attempt is made in the following pages to present some facts collected from a number of sources, about the life, work and philosophy of Subba Row, and to provide a true historical perspective. It is hoped that this will enable the readers to arrive at some understanding of the events which form the backdrop for a movement whose aims and work have been seriously pursued to the present day.

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## T. Subba Row, a Member of the Theosophical Society

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‘HIS being at Madras was one of the causes of our fixing upon that presidency town for our official residence,’ says Colonel H. S. Olcott in his *Old Diary Leaves*, referring to the early days of the Theosophical Society in India.

‘He’ was Mr Tallapragada Subba Row, a young *vakil* of Triplicane in Madras, who was later to play a distinguished and yet disturbing role in the history of the Society. Colonel Olcott writes:

The fact is, however, that as regards climate I prefer it [Madras] above the others, and as to Samskrit 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.<sup>1</sup>



Subba Row received the founders of the Theosophical Society and their party at eleven o'clock in the morning of 23 April 1882 when they arrived by boat from Calcutta and made them 'stop aboard until 4 p.m., for which hour a formal reception had been arranged'.<sup>2</sup>

He wrote to Madame Blavatsky on 3 February 1882 that he thought 'it is highly desirable that you should come here, if circumstances permit, by the time Col. Olcott comes here from Calcutta'.<sup>3</sup> He had been in correspondence with the founders who were then stationed in Bombay.

Subba Row was admitted into the membership of the Society on 25 April 1882, 'alone in private, for some unfathomable reason of mystery,' states Colonel Olcott.<sup>2</sup>

About fifty members were admitted at different times during the founders' first stay in Madras which lasted until 3 May. H. S. Olcott records:

The Madras Theosophical Society came into being with R. Raghonath Row as President, and T. Subba Row as Secretary. The former used his best endeavours to make it a useful Branch, but he was not well seconded by the latter, who was a most indolent executive officer.<sup>4</sup>

Subba Row continued to assist the founders in their theosophical work through his articles,

and for some time by seeing *The Theosophist* through the press. He also served on a number of committees including the General Council, until he resigned his membership. He was President of the Madras Theosophical Society then. The Supplement of *The Theosophist* of July 1888 states: 'At its session of 17 April 1888 Dewan R. Raghonatha Row was elected a member of the executive committee vice T. Subba Row resigned.'

Subba Row was one of the councillors called by A. O. Hume 'to save' the Society in May 1885. Hume proposed the resignation of the principal officers, that the property at Adyar be sold and a new scientifico-philosophico-humanitarian Theosophical Society be started in its stead. The councillors rejected the proposal and met HPB to affirm their support for her.<sup>5</sup>

Colonel Olcott writes: 'We saw a good deal of T. Subba Row at Headquarters at this period, and enjoyed many opportunities to profit by his instructive occult teachings.'<sup>6</sup>

In a private letter to Madame Blavatsky on 1 January 1886 Olcott writes:

You remember Subba Row's great project for a national Advaita Society to be secretly moved by certain Initiates and to be fathered by Śankarāchārya, the High Priest, and act in harmony with the Theosophical Society; well it has just been born, meetings have

been held, rules have been drafted, Śankarāchārya's Presidency is agreed to by him, some 400 or 500 Pundits alone in this Presidency will join. Money is offered to put up a lecture Hall in Madras with Advaita preachers going all over India. Subba Row means to work it so that it will strengthen existing Theosophical Societies, T.S. Branches, and hatch new ones where there are none — so you see he is especially anxious that there should be no new scandals or rows in connection with the T.S. for fear Śankarāchārya (an Initiate) and the whole orthodox party should get frightened and set themselves to break us up.

Now do keep quiet, for God's sake do keep cool — you know who Śankarāchārya is !!!

We shall get things around after a while so that you can return with honour.<sup>7</sup>

During the annual convention 1885, Subba Row delivered an introductory lecture and later in 1886, a series of four lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the text of which was subsequently brought out in book form. Colonel Olcott records:

This year's [1886 convention] session was made memorable by a course of four lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā* by T. Subba Row, which charmed his hearers and, in book form, are now among the most precious treasures of our theosophical literature. They were a foretaste of the intellectual character which has been stamped upon our Adyar annual meetings by the discourses of Mrs Besant.<sup>8</sup>

[ 4 ]

In the year 1898, he records:

It will be remembered that, in 1887, while Mr Cooper-Oakley was, by HPB's appointment, acting as Editor of *The Theosophist*, he published an article by T. Subba Row, on the number of 'principles' going to make up a man, he preferring the exoteric classification of five, as opposed to her occult group of seven; step which threw her into a violent rage and was followed shortly after by her establishment of the magazine, *Lucifer*, now *The Theosophical Review*. Mr Cooper-Oakley withdrew from the editorship and I took it over, but kept the name of HPB on the cover several years and until she begged me to substitute my own for hers. Mr Cooper-Oakley and his friend Dr Nield Cook as well as T. Subba Row, resigned their membership in the Society.<sup>9</sup>

Even after his resignation Subba Row continued to meet the founders, subscribed to their journals and spoke of them 'in the old friendly way'. Olcott considered that the differences between HPB and Subba Row were 'due in a measure to third parties'. Subba Row continued to visit the Adyar headquarters until he became bedridden. His last recorded visit was in the first week of April 1890.

Olcott records Subba Row's resignation and incidental factors thus:

The Bombay Branch sent me, on November 30th [1888], a resolution recommending that T. Subba Row, who had resigned, be asked to come back to us, but I

[ 5 ]

have positively refused to lower the Society's dignity in any similar case, however influential might be the seceder – my conviction having always been that the cause we stood for is so infinitely greater and more majestic, than any man or woman engaged in the T.S. work, that it would have been a lowering of my self-respect to beg anybody to stand by us against his inclinations. To my apprehension, a man could not enjoy a higher honour than the chance to help the Teachers in their benevolent plan for the uplifting of contemporary humanity.<sup>10</sup>

On 3 June 1890 Olcott visited Subba Row at the latter's request. His account of the meeting shows the parental affection he always had for him:

He was in a dreadful state, his body covered with boils and blisters from crown to sole, as the result of bloodpoisoning from some mysterious cause. He could not find it in anything that he had eaten or drunk, 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 HPB and the author, of 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.<sup>11</sup>

[ 6 ]

Colonel Olcott wrote '*Death of T. Subba Row, B.A., B.L.*' for *The Theosophist*. An appended note thereto declares: 'The above, having been considered in family-council, was endorsed as follows:

Read and found correct – D.T.R. Brother-in-law of T. Subba Row.<sup>12</sup>

Subba Row's untimely death (he was running his thirty-fourth year and had only to live another fortnight to complete it) was lamented by many members of the Society, besides his relatives and colleagues.

For one who might wonder why a strong Vedānta-oriented orthodox Brāhman such as T. Subba Row would join the T.S. at all and later leave it, the following excerpt from a letter written by TSR himself to a friend will be of interest:

It is not necessary one should be a member of any society to deserve a Guru. But the Occult Fraternities in every part of the world have now made a rule that admission into their ranks must be sought through the 'Theosophical Society'. I mistake no confidence when I inform you that I know personally of many instances in which those who were Chelas – a very high Chela one of them – before the advent of the Society among us in India, were compelled by their Gurus to join the Society on pain of their being forsaken by them.<sup>13</sup>

There was no doubt that Subba Row was

[ 7 ]

highly respected for his great erudition and proficiency in the occult science. He will long continue to be remembered in the theosophical circles 'as a brilliant young mystical philosopher'.

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**References:**

1. H. S. Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves (ODL)*, II, Adyar, Theosophical Publishing House, 1974, 362.
2. *ibid.*, 344-4.
3. *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to A. P. Sinnett (HPB Letters)* Letter No. CLXI, California, Theosophical University Press, 1973, 316.
4. *ODL*, II, 344.
5. 'HPB Letter to A. P. Sinnett', *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett (ML)*, Adyar, TPH, 1979, 461-2.
6. *ODL*, III, 1972, 394.
7. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXVI, 325.
8. *ODL*, III, 400.
9. *ibid.*, VI, 1975, 343.
10. *ibid.*, IV, 1975, 74.
11. *ibid.*, 241-2.
12. *The Theosophist*, July 1890; also T. Subba Row, *Esoteric Writings (EW)*, Adyar, TPH, 1980, xiv.
13. *The Theosophical Forum*, Vol. VI, No.7, 188 as quoted in *Damodar and the Pioneers of the Theosophical Movement (Damodar)*, compiled by Sven Eek, Adyar, TPH, 1975, 668.

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## T. Subba Row's Literary Attainments

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**SUBBA ROW** would discuss philosophical matters for any length of time, yet he was a reluctant writer. Colonel Olcott, although he had a great affection for him, could not tolerate his indolence. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the way the Madras Theosophical Society Branch was working. He wrote in 1882:

The community seemed caught by a wave of enthusiasm for the time being, and it was not strange that we two [the founders] should have believed it would last, but time dispelled the illusion. Shortly afterward the Cosmopolitan Club, with lounging, reading, and billiard rooms, was started, and our excited friends gradually left metaphysics and Yoga philosophy for the elevating game of pool and the mental pabulum of the newspaper files.<sup>1</sup>

In a private letter to Madame Blavatsky on 19 January 1886 he says:

Now another thing. Subba Row is getting keen on a collation of Indian and Egyptian esoteric philosophy and symbolism. He has broken ground in 'The Virgin of the World'. A. K. and E. M. have — of course — sent a rejoinder that will go in next month, and this has stirred him up to replying.<sup>2</sup>

But, further on, he declares that 'S.R. is laziness and selfishness incarnate but with anybody to do the writing and plodding he will talk *ad libitum*.'<sup>3</sup>

Olcott was clearly indignant that Subba Row was not putting enough effort into imparting instruction to aspirants and was not doing all he could to write for the benefit of posterity. Subba Row may well have had his own reasons; we must also remember that he was a full-time *vakil* with a lucrative practice in the courts of Madras and 'might have been made much more so had he given less attention to philosophy'.<sup>4</sup>

Subba Row's literary work began when he joined the Theosophical Society and took an active part in its work. His first essay was on 'The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac' in which he explains the esoteric and spiritual significance of the signs, and relates them to the forces in nature and the cosmos.<sup>5</sup> He also correlates them to 'the first chapter of the history of this universe', extending from the self-existent eternal Brahman

to the five elements. 'The history of creation and of this world from its beginning up to the present time is composed of *seven* chapters. The seventh chapter is not yet written [completed].'<sup>6</sup> HPB quoted this statement of TSR as an introductory top-note for her chapter, 'Summing Up' in the *SD*. This article arrested her attention and she quoted it in *The Secret Doctrine*.

TSR wrote articles, reviews, answers to questions and rejoinders to critical articles for *The Theosophist*, of which, for some time, he was in charge. These articles were first published in book form in 1895 under the title *A Collection of Esoteric Writings of T. Subba Row, B.A., B.L., F.T.S.* by the Bombay Theosophical Publishing Fund, founded chiefly by Tookaram Tatya, a good friend of the theosophical movement and of Subba Row. There were one or two reprints of this edition, but a revised and enlarged second edition was brought out by the Theosophical Publishing House in 1931 in which C. Jinarajadasa added a selection of papers hitherto unpublished and collected from notes taken by Judge Subrahmania Iyer who was also a friend of Subba Row. These are included in the *Esoteric Writings*. It includes a letter written to one Sri Vavilala Sivavadhanulugaru of Machilipatnam dated 1 July 1885. This letter is of great

importance because it explains the stand taken by Subba Row on many contemporary issues. The following are extracts:

You are not correct in stating that Theosophy contradicts itself by stating first that the highest spiritual improvement is possible for every human being and next that karma influences possibility... Karma itself is a product of human effort and of human action, and can be altered and varied by human endeavour. Karma is not a settled and invariable cause, existing from eternity to eternity, predetermining the fate of every human being through thousands of incarnations...a definite path of progress to adeptship [exists].... The evil passions of humanity at the present stage block the way, not the Adepts. They are willing to help every man who is fitted for this kind of study, if he is really willing to help himself.... No one is immaculate and no one is entirely vicious.... Their [Adepts'] influence on the progress of humanity will be the same whether they live in Their retreats or in a place like Madras.... You say you cannot understand the precipitation of writing...and no amount of theoretical explanation that I can give will satisfy you...your inability to conceive it does not disprove the phenomenon.... She [Madame B.] happens to be the only agent that can be employed by the *Mahatmas* for the purposes of the T.S.... Please recollect also that the person inhabiting Madame B's body (who is a Hindu chela) has tremendous difficulties to cope with... we decided...that the Society as such should not make it its duty to defend Madame B. ...Mr Hodgson's report is adverse, no doubt. We are not responsible for it however. The result is further due to

the misstatements of a few unscrupulous men in our camp. I cannot say anything more about it now.... Colonel Olcott might have made some careless statements in a spirit of bravado...such statements mean nothing very serious....I can give you my assurance that Occult science and the Theosophical Society have got some basis of truth to stand upon.<sup>7</sup>

Though emanating from another book, *Philosophy of the Bhagavad-gītā*, his ideas on the classification of principles, the incidental controversies and findings are all included in this text.<sup>8</sup> The revised and enlarged edition of *Esoteric Writings* of Subba Row is currently in circulation, having been reprinted by the Theosophical Publishing House in 1980. A further edition of the book might perhaps include the lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā* so that his complete work would be available to readers in one volume.

*The Philosophy of the Bhagavad-gītā* is made up of the talks revised by himself and were delivered at the Theosophical Convention in 1886. These talks were deeply scholarly and mystical and brought much fame to him. Madame Blavatsky quotes extensively from this book in *The Secret Doctrine*, particularly in her notes on the term *Mūlaprakṛiti* and in her explanation of the significance of numbers and *Avatāras*.



We must be grateful to Justice Subrahmanian Iyer for this text. But for his providential absence in Calcutta when the lectures were delivered we would have not had them in this form. Mr Iyer engaged a shorthand writer paying from his own resources a good fee of Rs. 150 to take down and transcribe the lectures for his own use. These notes were then revised by the speaker for inclusion in *The Theosophist*. Left to himself, Subba Row would not have found the time or the energy to write down the talks himself.

In 1888, the lectures were published in book form by Tookaram Tatya of Bombay and were later reprinted many times. The two principal editions were those brought out by the Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, in 1931 and by the Theosophical University Press, Point Loma, California in 1934 under the titles of *Philosophy of Bhagavad-gītā* and *Notes on the Bhagavad-gītā* respectively. A chronology of the talks and related matters is appended. At the outset Subba Row codifies the points of view of the Theosophical Society and explains the premise upon which the *Bhagavad-gītā* rests:

I think it necessary to make a few preliminary remarks. All of you know that our Society is established upon a cosmopolitan basis. We are not wedded to any particular creed or to any particular system or religious philosophy.... We shall, no doubt, be able to find out

[ 14 ]

the fundamental principles of all philosophy and base upon them a system which is likely to satisfy our wants and aspirations.... I shall simply put them [my views] forward for what they are worth. They are the results of my own investigations into various systems of philosophy and no higher authority is alleged for them....

The *Bhagavad-gītā* starts from certain premises, which are not explained at length — they are simply alluded to here and there, and quoted for the purpose of enforcing the doctrine, or as authorities, and Krishna does not go into the details of the philosophy which is their foundation. Still there is a philosophical basis beneath his teachings, and unless that basis is carefully surveyed, we cannot understand the practical applications of the teachings of the *Bhagavad-gītā* or even test them in the only way in which they can be tested.<sup>8</sup>

And he says:

...I do not mean to adopt the sevenfold classification of [the principles of] man that has up to this time been adopted in theosophical writings generally...[This] seems to me to be a very unscientific and misleading one.<sup>9</sup>

A footnote tells us that:

This statement raised a controversy between the lecturer and Madame H. P. Blavatsky for which the reader is referred to *A Collection of Esoteric Writings of the late Mr T. Subba Row* published by us.<sup>10</sup>

[ 15 ]

Subba Row continues:

... this sevenfold classification is almost conspicuous by its absence in many of our Hindu books. At any rate a considerable portion of it is almost unintelligible to Hindu minds; and so it is better to adopt the time-honoured classification of four principles....<sup>11</sup>

This statement seems to imply that anything not available in 'Hindu books' is not acceptable to Subba Row. In the course of the third lecture, he says:

An attempt will be made in *The Secret Doctrine* to indicate the nature of this mystery [Krishna and all the incarnations mentioned in the *Bhagavad-gītā* – and that mystery goes to the very root of all Occult Science] as far as possible, but it must not be imagined that the veil will be completely drawn, and that the whole mystery will be revealed.<sup>12</sup>

This testifies to the assistance he intended to render Madame Blavatsky in editing her work; unfortunately this was not to be.

He gives a fitting ending to the talks, pointing out the uniqueness of the theosophical point of view and exhorting the members of the Society, who are seekers for truth, to labour on the right lines:

The Society cannot provide you with philosophical food already digested, as though you were in the ideal state of passivity aimed at by the advocates of the Sāmkhyan philosophy; but every one of you is expected

to read and study the subject for himself. Read and gain knowledge, and then use what you have gained for the benefit of your own countrymen... we have assimilated a whole collection of superstitious beliefs and practices which do not by any means tend to promote the welfare of the Hindu nation, but demoralize it and sap its spiritual strength, and have led to the present state of things, which I believe, is not entirely due to political degeneration.

Our Society stands upon an altogether unsectarian basis; we sympathize with every religion... and while sympathizing with every religion and making the best efforts we can for the purpose of recovering the common foundations that underlie all religious beliefs, it ought to be the duty of every one of us to try to enlighten our own countrymen on the philosophy of religion, and endeavour to lead them back to a purer faith – a faith which, no doubt, did exist in former times, but which now lives but in name or in the pages of forgotten books.<sup>13</sup>



### Chronology of the articles

Title given	<i>The Theosophist</i> Month and Page	Ref. to Text
* <i>Notes on the Bhagavad-gītā</i> I	February 1887 299-311	pp. 10-34
* -do- II	March 1887 359-70	pp. 35-57
* -do- III	April 1887 430-47	pp. 58-95
HPB's article <i>Classification of Principles</i>	April 1887 448-56	pp. 315-32
Subba Row's reply: <i>The Constitution of the Microcosm</i>	May 1887 504-11	pp. 333-49
* <i>Notes on the Bhagavad-gītā</i> IV	July 1887 633-48	pp. 96-127
<i>Reclassification of Principles</i> by HPB	August 1887 651-55	pp. 350-58
<i>The Constitution of the Microcosm</i> by TSR (cont. from p. 511)	August 1887 699-707	pp. 359-75
<i>Theosophical Theories of the Microcosm</i> by W. Q. Judge	August 1887 712-14	—
<i>The Bhagavad-gītā and the Microcosmic Principles</i> by N. D. Khandalawala		pp. 376-87

\* Reports of four extempore discourses delivered by Mr T. Subba Row, B.A., B.L., before the delegates attending the Convention of the T.S. at Adyar, Madras, December 27-31, 1886.

### References:

1. *ODL*, II. 343.
2. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXVII, 326.
3. *ibid.*, 326; the essay 'The Virgin of the World' appears in *EW* also.
4. *EW*, xii; also, published in *The Theosophist*, July 1890.
5. *ibid.*, 3.
6. *The Secret Doctrine (SD)*, I, Adyar, TPH, 1971, 313; see also *EW*, 19.
7. *EW*, 562-7.
8. T. Subba Row, *Notes on the Bhagavad-gītā (Notes on BG)*, California Theosophical University Press, 1978, 10-11.
9. *ibid.*, 13-14.
10. T. Subba Row, *Lectures on the Study of the Bhagavad-gītā*, Bombay, Tookaram Tatya, 1897, 7-8.
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12. *ibid.*, 69.
13. *ibid.*, 126-7.

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## T. Subba Row's Mystic Practices

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ACCORDING to the biographic sketch provided by Colonel H. S. Olcott, Subba Row 'gave no early signs of possessing mystical knowledge'. Subba Row's mother informed Olcott 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 HPB, and Damodar, and became personal after our meeting him, in 1882, at Madras'.<sup>1</sup>

Olcott continues:

It was as though a store-house of occult experience, long forgotten, had been suddenly opened to him; recollection of his last preceding birth came in upon him; he recognized his Guru, and thenceforward held intercourse with him and other Mahatmas; with some, personally at our Headquarters, with others elsewhere and by correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

It must be remembered that Subba Row was

born into a religious and orthodox Smārtha Brāhmaṇ family. Bearing in mind the period and his upbringing, it can safely be assumed that the practices of *sandhyāvandanam* and *nitya-agni-kāryam* (daily offerings to the fire-gods) were carried out by him from the time of his *upanayanam* (initiation into the religious mysteries). This was a matter of routine in the religious life and no metaphysical or philosophical learning was needed by the practitioners.

Subba Row stated that 'one-third of his life is passed in a world of which his own mother has no idea [as to how different it was from the routine life].'<sup>3</sup> He seems to have arrested the attention of Madame Blavatsky with his essay 'The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac' for *The Theosophist* in 1881. He was in correspondence with her even before they finally met in 1882.

He took his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1876 and, according to what he told S. Subrahmaniam Iyer (later Acting Chief Justice of the High Court of Judicature, Madras), he took up the study of spiritual philosophy nine years afterwards. He practised Hatha Yoga receiving instruction from a wise old man, a black *Dravida*. This spiritual teacher was appropriately named as *Dattātreya*.

The spiritual, philosophical system adopted by Subba Row was Tāraka Rāja Yoga, 'one of the Brāhmanical yoga systems for the development of purely spiritual powers and knowledge which lead to Nirvana'.<sup>4</sup>

It appears that there are no printed texts expounding this particular system of philosophy, but its practice must have been indeed rigorous if his occult knowledge is attributed to it. In his own words:

Tāraka Rāja Yoga is, as it were, the centre and the heart of Vedāntic philosophy, as it is decidedly, in its higher aspects, the most important portion of the ancient Wisdom-Religion. Very little of it is known at present in India.... In truth, however, it is one of the seven main branches into which the whole of the occult science is divided, and is derived according to all accounts from the 'children of the fire-mist' of the mysterious land of Shamballah.<sup>5</sup>

He refused to impart spiritual training to any who were not properly prepared to receive it. For example, he emphatically refused to guide or train Subrahmania Iyer, his colleague at the bar and his friend of the Cosmopolitan Club because he did not perform his *nitya-sandhyā-vandanam* or daily offering to the sun-god.

His meeting with Madame Blavatsky opened new doors of perception for him. He greatly appreciated her occult knowledge and abilities.

He believed that a 'Hindu yogi' occupied her physical body and was responsible for the phenomena. But it is difficult to assess how his association with her fitted in with his earlier knowledge derived from the practice of Hatha Yoga or Tāraka Rāja Yoga. In his private conversations with Colonel Olcott and others, he did not conceal the fact that the Master Morya was his Guru and that this fact was revealed to him explicitly when he first met HPB.<sup>6</sup>

The Master K.H. writing in June 1882 confirms that he was indeed a chela of the Master Morya.

I do not know Subba Row—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....<sup>7</sup>

Subba Row felt strongly that the occult science, its practice and application should be guarded. On this account he incurred the displeasure of Madame Blavatsky, but this did not move him. His spiritual teachers had also to show a great deal of tolerance towards him. Master M. wrote on 7 December 1882 to A. P. Sinnett:

You must have patience with Subba Row. Give him time. He is now at his *tapas* and will not be disturbed. I will tell him not to neglect you but he is

very jealous and regards teaching an Englishman as a sacrilege.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from other factors, keeping a secret and not revealing it even at the cost of dishonour or life was to him a necessary part of occult practice. In a letter dated 3 February 1882 to Madame Blavatsky before he met her, he wrote:

The little of occultism that still remains in India is centred in this Madras Presidency; and this fact you will be able to find out for yourself in course of time. The great revival of Yoga Vidyā in the time of our great Śankarāchāriar had its origin in this part of India; and from that time up to the present day, Southern India never had the misfortune of being deserted by *all its initiates*.<sup>9</sup>

‘At noon’, on the day of his death, ‘he said his Guru called him to come, he was going to die, he was now about beginning his *tapas* (mystical invocations), and he did not wish to be disturbed. From that time on, he spoke to no one.’<sup>10</sup>

Clearly this was not so much a premonition of death as an awareness of the continuity of life under the direction of his Master. He passed away at 10 p.m.

‘He lived his Occult life alone.’<sup>11</sup>

#### References:

1. ‘Death of T. Subba Row, B.A., B.L.’, *The Theosophist*, July 1890; also reprinted in *EW*, xiii.
2. *EW*, xiii.
3. *ODL*, III, 394.
4. H. P. Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary*, Bangalore, Theosophy Company (Mysore) Private Ltd., 1978, 321.
5. *EW*, 364-5.
6. Howard Murphet, *Hammer on the Mountain*, Wheaton, 1972, 166.
7. *ML*, No. 17, 115.
8. *ibid.*, No. 12, 70.
9. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXI, 318.
10. *The Theosophist*, July 1890.
11. *ibid.*

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## A Teacher who would not Teach

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SUBBA ROW was interested in building a cadre of 'real initiates' within the Theosophical Society who would be 'acting under the instructions given by the Adepts'.<sup>1</sup>

It should be remembered that in 1879 the Society consisted of three sections:

The highest or First Section is composed exclusively of proficients or initiates in Esoteric Science and Philosophy, who take a deep interest in the Society's affairs and instruct the President-Founder how best to regulate them, but whom none but such as they voluntarily communicate with, have the right to know.<sup>2</sup> The Second Section embraces such Theosophists as have proved by their fidelity, zeal, and courage, and their devotion to the Society.<sup>3</sup>

The Third Section to which a new candidate is admitted duly sponsored by two Fellows and who shall be invested with signs, words or tokens, and also take an obligation to keep secrets to himself.<sup>4</sup>

The objects of the Society were rewritten in 1881. They were:

1. To form the Nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity.
2. To study Āryan literature, religion and science.
3. To vindicate the importance of this inquiry and correct misrepresentations with which it has been clouded.
4. To explore the hidden mysteries of Nature and the latent powers of Man, on which the Founders believe that Oriental Philosophy is in a position to throw light.<sup>5</sup>

We note that for the first time the idea of universal brotherhood was brought into the objects and that the 'study of Āryan literature' and 'oriental philosophy' are given great importance. In 1875, the expressed object of the Society was only 'to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe'.<sup>6</sup>

Subba Row, even before he was admitted into the membership of the Society, offered to help formulate 'some ritualistic system' and to draw up a scheme for 'systematic occult training for those who are admitted into the said Section'.<sup>7</sup> He had strong views on the subject of the 'Yoga Vidyā' of South India; he wrote in confidence:

*'We still have even men amongst us – secure from the molestation of haughty British officials and impertinent missionaries, in dark mountain caves and trackless*

impenetrable forests—those who have almost reached the shores of the ocean of Nirvana.<sup>8</sup>

He was aware of the uncertain attitude of persons like Hume: 'It is only to sincere believers in Yoga Vidyā and the existence of Adepts that these stern mystics are accessible. Even if an English Theosophist like Mr Hume were to catch hold of one of these men by accident, he will soon put his philosophy to the proof.'<sup>9</sup>

Subba Row wrote to Mr Sinnett on 7 May 1882 that he had been 'requested by Madame Blavatsky several times within the last three months to give you such practical instruction in our occult Science as I may be permitted to give to one in your position; and I am now ordered by — to help you to a certain extent in lifting up a portion of the first veil of mystery'.... These were the conditions to be observed:

1. You must give me your word of Honour that you will never reveal to anybody whether belonging to the Theosophical Society or not, the Secrets communicated to you unless you previously obtain my permission to do so.
2. You must lead such a life as is quite consistent with the Spirit of the rules already given for your guidance.
3. You must reiterate your promise to promote as far as it lies in your power the objects of the Theosophical Association.

4. You must strictly act up to the directions that will be given to you with the instruction herein promised.

He adds that 'anything like a wavering state of mind as to the reality of Occult Science and the efficacy of the prescribed process is likely to prevent the production of the desired result'.<sup>10</sup>

Sinnett appears to have given only a qualified assent. Subba Row wrote another letter on 26 June containing certain pointers on spiritual training and life.

...no student of Occult Philosophy has ever succeeded in developing his psychic powers without leading the life prescribed for such students;... The mere acquisition of wonder-working powers can never secure immortality for the student of Occult Science unless he has learnt the means of shifting gradually his sense of individuality from his corruptible material body to the incorruptible and eternal *Non-Being* represented by his seventh principle.<sup>11</sup>

He expressed his willingness 'to give you both [APS and AOH] such theoretical instruction as I may be able to give in the Philosophy of the Ancient Brāhmanical religion and Esoteric Buddhism'.<sup>12</sup> Before Subba Row could positively reply in these terms, he consulted his own spiritual teacher. The Master K.H. wrote to Sinnett:

'I strongly advise you not to undertake at present a task beyond your strength and means; *for once pledged*

were you to break your promise it would cut you off for years, if not for ever from any further progress. I said from the first to *Rishi* 'M.' that his intention was kind but his project *wild*. How can you in your position undertake any such labour? Occultism is not to be trifled with. It demands *all* or nothing. I read your letter to S.R. sent by him to Morya and I see you do not understand the first principles of *Chela* training. Poor Subba Row is 'in a fix' — that is why he does not answer you. On one hand he has the indomitable HPB 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 unpassable Chinese wall of rules and *Law*. Believe me, good friend, learn what you can under the circumstances — *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 Brāhman and holding to the *Brāhmanical* esoteric teaching — will be different from those of the 'Arhat Buddhist' terminology. But essentially both are the same — *identical* in fact. My heart melts when I read Mr Hume's sincere noble letter — especially what I perceive between the lines. Yes; to one from his standpoint our policy must seem selfish and *cruel*. I wish I were the Master! In five or six years I hope to become my own 'guide' and things will have somewhat to change, then. But even Caesar in irons cannot shuffle off the irons and transfer them to Hippo or Thraso the turnkey. Let us wait. I cannot think of Mr Hume without remembering each time an allegory of my own country: the genius of Pride watching over a treasure, an inexhaustible wealth of every human virtue, the divine gift of Brahmā to man. The

Genius has fallen asleep over its treasure now, and one by one the virtues are peeping out.... Will he awake before they are all freed from their lifelong bonds? That is the question.<sup>13</sup>

Subba Row explains in greater detail to HPB why it is impossible to teach occult Science to men like Hume and Sinnett who 'do not consent to obtain occult knowledge in the way in which ordinary chelas do'.<sup>14</sup>

And in my case the difficulty is considerably enhanced for two reasons:

(1) *Because I do not dare* show a thing of Occult Science *practically*, and (2) *Because...* I am constrained to act as if I did not know the Brothers when I really only refused to speak about them. Hence there is some danger of these people getting disappointed in course of time and relapsing into their former state of scepticism, if there is no danger of their turning out our enemies when they find that *practical* instruction will not be given to them.<sup>15</sup>

Master K.H. confirms the point when he says: 'You see now what he fears. Promise him in writing *not to question him* or press him to answer your questions about us and he will give you instructions with pleasure and as you see he is not altogether wrong.'<sup>14</sup>

His deep-rooted racial prejudice is disclosed in this sentence: 'It will not be a very easy thing to make me believe that any Englishman can really be induced to labour for the good of my



countrymen without having any other motive but sincere feeling and sympathy towards them.’<sup>14</sup>

K. H. says, rather helplessly: ‘So deep is the prejudice you see, that he will hardly believe M. or myself, when we assure him of your sincerity.’<sup>14</sup>

Later, on 16 August 1882, Subba Row writes to the Master K.H. explaining why he advised Hume not to come to see him at Madras. ‘I need hardly say that I can never teach him the whole mystery of our ancient science and philosophy as I do not know the whole of it myself. And even if I am in possession of some of the secrets which are revealed only to initiates and proper candidates for initiation, I shall not be permitted to communicate such secrets to him either orally or by any other means of communication.’<sup>16</sup>

In order to come to a clear understanding of the situation, the correspondence, available from different sources, should be read in its chronological order as suggested at the end of this section.

The Master K.H. writes in March 1885:

Thus, my friend, there comes a forcible end to the projected occult instructions. Everything was settled and prepared. The secret Committee, appointed to receive our letters and teachings and to convey them to the Oriental group, was ready, when a few Europeans—for reasons I prefer not mentioning—

took upon themselves the authority of reversing the decision of the whole Council. They declined (though the reason they gave was another one)—to receive our instructions through Subba Row and Damodar, the latter of whom is hated by Messrs L. Fox and Hartmann. Subba R. resigned and Damodar went to Tibet. Are our Hindus to be blamed for this?’<sup>17</sup>

The whole scheme of occult training appears to have failed not only because of mutual mistrust between Indians and Europeans, but of their deep-rooted prejudices and dogmatic and orthodox ideas.

#### Chronology of letters from TSR

3 February 1882	Letter no. CLXI (BLS)	To HPB inviting her to Madras and offering his help in the work.
7 May 1882	130 (ML)	To APS asking for certain promises.
3 June 1882	132 (ML)	To HPB giving extracts from M.’s comments.
	76 (ML)	Comments of K.H. to APS on the above letter (No.132)
26 June 1882	131 (ML)	To APS after receiving his qualified assent, explaining the difficulties in giving practical training.
10 August 1882	CLXII (BLS)	To HPB explaining why he cannot teach APS and AOH
16 August 1882	CLXIV (BLS)	To K.H. explaining the mental and physical inhibitions against Hume’s visit.



**References :**

1. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXI, 318.
2. Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society (Short History)*, Adyar, TPH, 1938, 547.
3. C. Jinarajadasa, *The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society (Golden Book)*, Adyar, TPH, 1925, 246.
4. *Short History*, 547-8.
5. *ibid.*, 548.
6. *ibid.*, 545.
7. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXI, 318.
8. *ibid.*, 316-7.
9. *ibid.*, 317.
10. *ML*, No. 130, 450.
11. *ibid.*, No. 131, 451-2.
12. *ibid.*, 452.
13. *ibid.*, Nos. 132 and 76, 453 and 369-70.
14. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXII, 318-21.
15. *ibid.*, No. CLXII, 320.
16. *ibid.*, No. CLXIV, 323.
17. *ML*, No. 65, 357.

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## T. Subba Row and Madame Blavatsky

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**S**UBBA ROW read newspaper accounts of the founders of the Theosophical Society and their arrival in India. Though he met them in 1882 his correspondence with them had started earlier. In his letter dated 3 February 1882 he writes to Madame Blavatsky inviting her and Colonel Olcott to visit Madras:

No doubt, I individually am very anxious to see you; but that is not the important reason for asking you to come here. Though no Branch Theosophical Association has yet been established here, there are a good many gentlemen here who sincerely sympathize with your aims and objects and who would be very glad to see you.... Your *Isis Unveiled* has made a very strong impression on their minds.... There are, I believe, some Europeans also, here, who are very anxious to see you. Please see therefore, if you cannot spare a few days to gratify the expectations of these gentlemen.<sup>1</sup>

In the same letter he explains later how

difficult it would be for any Indian Adept to visit a person like Hume. He declares that 'it will take some time before these mystics can be asked to do anything for the Theosophists'.<sup>2</sup>

He suggests the adoption of 'some ritualistic system of Initiation for the second section' and hopes that this section will be 'composed of *real initiates* acting under the instructions given by the Adepts of the first section'. The contents of this letter were, by and large, endorsed by the Master M. who, with regards to this particular suggestion, writes with characteristic humour: 'One might do worse than consult the young man about the proposed manual also.'<sup>3</sup>

Subba Row did not hide the fact that his inner perceptions and occult experiences gained momentum only after he met Madame Blavatsky and for long he had an immense regard and reverence for her. His mother said that he had spoken glowingly about HPB: 'She is a mysterious lady; phenomena occur in her presence — a Hindu Yogi is occupying her body.'

In August 1882, Subba Row thanked HPB for sending him a photograph, and for her kind advice. 'I shall try my best', he said, 'not to deviate from the course pointed out to me.'<sup>4a</sup> In a letter he says of himself :

'As for adeptship, I know very well how far I am from

it. I have not heard up to this time that any one placed in my position has ever succeeded in becoming an Adept. *Even practically I know very little of our Ancient Arcane Science.*<sup>4b</sup>

The last sentence was underlined by Master K.H. who commented: 'This is not quite so. He knows enough for any of you.'<sup>4c</sup>

In the same letter to HPB he says:

Your disinterested labours for the good of my country imperatively demand such assistance from me and from every other Hindu who loves his own country. It is enough for me to know that one of our Illustrious Brothers has been kind enough to notice me and render me some assistance.<sup>4d</sup>

But Subba Row gradually turned against her, much to the sorrow of other members. His animosity towards her came to the surface with the Coulomb conspiracy whereas, earlier, in a letter to one V.V. Sivavadhanulu (1-7-1885) he was at least neutral and impersonal:

The question at issue as between the Theosophical Society and the public is not whether Madame B. is honest or dishonest, but whether occult science is a reality or a fiction. Even a single genuine phenomenon must procure a finding in our favour. My client is the Theosophical Society and not Madame B.<sup>5</sup>

On 31 March 1885, Madame Blavatsky 'sailed away from her beloved India, never to return',<sup>6</sup> having resigned from the post of

Corresponding Secretary on the twenty-first. She was sent to Europe for 'better health'. The President formed an 'experimental Executive Committee' to manage the Society's affairs, with T. Subba Row among the members and C. W. Leadbeater as its Secretary. This committee, having met on the twelfth of April, accepted HPB's resignation and recorded 'their high sense of the valuable services she had rendered to the cause of Science and Philosophy'.<sup>7</sup>

Public opinion for and against HPB, verbal charges and countercharges were mounting. The council was strongly against rebutting the charges. Subba Row declared that 'if HPB kept up this agitation (by pamphlets, correspondence and personal talk, and by such rows as the present...), he should not only resign from the Theosophical Society, but get all with whom he had any influence to do likewise'.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, by 1886, the atmosphere had cooled down somewhat and there was some thought that HPB could be called back to India, but then, to the astonishment of Colonel Olcott, Subba Row was strongly opposed to such an idea.

'Things were growing more and more unpleasant at Adyar on account of the friction between HPB and T. Subba Row and certain of his Anglo-Indian backers', records Olcott.<sup>9</sup>

Subba Row's withdrawal of cooperation with Madame Blavatsky in the matter of his promised assistance with *The Secret Doctrine*, his criticism through his lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā* of the sevenfold classification, and her replies and exchanges could only be productive of disharmony. Ultimately he resigned from the TS, although it is said that his relationship with it continued to be amicable. But the primary and basic objection he had for HPB's work was that she gave out many esoteric secrets to the profane. The fact that the plan for *The Secret Doctrine*, much of the writing, especially what was based on ancient records, was done by the Master himself was ignored by him. That HPB was under the close direction and guidance of the Master was a factor that Subba Row did not care to acknowledge. He went so far as to tell his associates that the Masters had forsaken her and that she was now only an empty shell devoid of all worth. This drew much irritation from HPB who, as usual, made no attempts to conceal her feelings.

Commenting on the events of the year 1887, Colonel Olcott writes:

It is painful beyond words to read her correspondence from Europe, and see how she suffered from various causes, fretting and worrying too often over mares' nests. Out of the sorest grievances I select the defection

of T. Subba Row; the admission into *The Theosophist* by the sub-editor (whom she had herself appointed) of articles which she considered antagonistic to the trans-Himālayan teachings; the refusal of Subba Row to edit *The Secret Doctrine* MSS., contrary to his original promise, although she had had it type-copied at a cost of £ 80 and sent me for that purpose; his wholesale condemnation of it....<sup>10</sup>

And Madame Blavatsky herself writes:

...so far I am the only link between the Europeans and the Mahatmas. The Hindus do not care. Dozens of them are chelas, hundreds *know* Them, but as in the case of Subba Row they will sooner die than speak of their Masters. Hume could get *nothing* from Subba Row, though everyone knows what he is.<sup>11</sup>

Madame Blavatsky's most revealing statement was made to Mrs and Miss Arundale in a letter dated 16 June 1885:

But why should the L[ondon] L[odge]...*the head and brains* of the TS suffer and risk disintegration for the wild beatings of its heart—the Adyar H. Quarters?... Such as Subba Row—uncompromising *initiated* Brāhmins, 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.O. 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 most hidden. Rather *that you should be sacrificed* than that which was never

meant for European minds....Otherwise they should have pumped *out of you all that you know*. And he is now acting on that principle. Please let Mr S. know this.<sup>12</sup>

Madame Blavatsky showed her disgust even earlier on 17 March when she says to A. P. Sinnett in a longish letter:

Though they stand by me [Mr Subba Row and others—when they voted against the paper presented by Hume demanding the resignation of all office-bearers including Blavatsky] and will stand to the last, they accuse me of having desecrated the Truth and the Masters by having been the means of the *Occult World* and even *Esoteric Buddhism*.... I—dead, say Society goodbye to the Masters. Say even now—all perhaps with one exception—for I have pledged my word to my Hindu Brothers, the occultists, *never to mention except among ourselves* Their names, and that I will keep it....and all this because we have profaned Truth by giving it out indiscriminately—and forgot the motto of the true Occultist: To know, to dare and to KEEP SILENT.<sup>13</sup>

On 27 March 1885, she wrote:

Subba Row repeats that the sacred science was desecrated and swears he will never open his lips to a European about occultism.<sup>14</sup>

And again, writing from Wurzburg on 9 October, she says that D.N. told her 'that his Master—Mahatma K.H. holds him, Damodar, and Subba Row responsible for the two-thirds of

Mr Hodgson's "mayas" — he says. It is *they*, who, irritated and insulted at his appearance at Adyar, regarding his (Hodgson's) cross-examination and talk about the *Masters*.<sup>15</sup>

Madame Blavatsky had to face the accusation that *Isis Unveiled* was written with the help of Subba Row. She countered this in a letter dated 9 January 1886:

I made Subba Row's acquaintance on the day I first arrived to Madras, in 1882. Saw him for a week and then when we left Bombay for Madras to live, in January, 1883 had exchanged with him a few letters till then. How could I write *Isis* with his help, I in New York, he at Madras and perfect strangers to each other?<sup>16</sup>

It was not that she was taking sides with Europeans. Early in 1882, when A.O. Hume sent an article for publication and said 'it must be published' she declares:

I certainly would have thrown it into the fire but K.H. sent word with Morya that he wanted it absolutely published and I have of course but to shut up. But he [Hume] will receive a nice protest from Subba Row and seven or more chelas at the end of it, and he will make himself *hated* by all the Hindus who believe in the Brothers that's all. I must say, that if his desire is to obtain knowledge from K.H. he takes funny ways to get it.<sup>17</sup>

This article of Hume alleges that *Isis Unveiled* was 'the most inaccurate work, full and

teeming with *practical errors*' and warns the public against the *selfish Asiatics* as he termed the Brothers.

The controversy between HPB and Subba Row over the fourfold or sevenfold classification of the principles of man was only a philosophical difference. By then, HPB had left India, 'never to return'; Subba Row was strictly against her being recalled, his attitude towards the promised editorial assistance in preparing *The Secret Doctrine* 'was becoming difficult' though he had not yet said that 'he would not lay his hands thereto'.

Madame Blavatsky referred to this controversy as 'a chink in the Chinese wall of esotericism' and considered his opening remarks to the lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā* 'a slur thrown on the original teaching'. She tried to show that there was no inconsistency between the two points of view, but Subba Row took a different stand and said, 'my remarks were deliberate and intentional'<sup>18</sup> — not a slip of the tongue, as HPB attempted to explain away. HPB quotes his earlier writings in support of the sevenfold classification, but Subba Row says that 'the sevenfold classification, though incorrect, was a step in advance. It did serve some purpose in its own way towards the investigation of the ancient systems of occult psychology'.<sup>19</sup>

N.D. Khandalavala, in a summing up of the controversy, disagrees with the stand taken by Subba Row.<sup>20</sup>

Madame Blavatsky, in her later years, had this to say about the controversy:

Every Esotericist who reads *The Theosophist* must remember how bitterly Subba Row, a learned Vedāntin Brāhman, arose against the septenary principles in man. He knew well I *had no right to and dared not to explain in The Theosophist*, a public magazine, the real numeration, and simply took advantage of my enforced silence. The doctrine of the seven Tattvas (the principles of the universe as in man) was held in great sacredness, and therefore secrecy, by the Brāhmins in days of old, by whom now the teaching is almost forgotten. Yet it is taught to this day in the schools beyond the Himālayan Range, but it is now hardly remembered or heard of in India except through rare Initiates. The policy has been changed gradually; chelas began to be taught the broad outlines of it, and at the advent of the TS in India, in 1879, I was ordered to teach it in its *exoteric* form to one or two, and obeyed.<sup>21</sup>

Madame Blavatsky felt very hurt at the way Subba Row had become her 'critic'. Though his concluding remarks were polite, it is difficult to say whether they had any effect in placating her or were, indeed, meant to do so.

But she never allowed a derogatory remark against Subba Row to remain unanswered. 'I could not...stand by and listen calmly to the

astounding news (from Gough!)...and Subba Row knows not what he is talking about, without kicking myself to death';<sup>22</sup>... 'Then an interminable article from that blind bat W. Oxley — versus Subba Row, whom he calls a bigoted *orthodox Brāhman* !!'<sup>23</sup> She only lamented that Subba Row '*had changed too*, as I have not received one line from him in these two and a half years in answer to my several long letters.'<sup>24</sup>

Madame Blavatsky in her magazine *Lucifer* notified the death of TSR very prominently thus:

There are few members of the Theosophical Society who have not heard of Subba Row, the great Vedāntin scholar; few readers of *The Secret Doctrine* who are not familiar with his name, as the talented author of the *Lectures on the Bhagavad-gītā* ... Karma has mysterious ways of working out its ends, which to the profane must remain for ever unfathomable. We can only feel profound regret that such karma has reached one by whose death Madras has been deprived of a giant-intellect, and India has lost one of her best scholars.

May his next rebirth be speedy and his life-span longer, and, above all, may he be born in Aryavarta still.  
*Sit tibi terra levis.*<sup>25</sup>

Madame Blavatsky exhibited a great sense of 'brotherliness for a co-disciple' as well as a 'willing obedience to the behests of Truth'.



## References:

1. *HPB Letters*, No. CLXI, 316.
2. *ibid.*, 317.
3. *ibid.*, 318.
4. *ibid.*, No. CLXII, 321.
5. *EW*, 566.
6. *Short History*, 222.
7. *ibid.*, 224.
8. *ibid.*, 228.
9. *ODL*, IV, 1975, 43.
10. *ibid.*, 23.
11. *ML*, No. 138, 467.
12. *HPB Letters*, No. XLII, 95-6
13. *ML*, No. 138, 467.
14. *HPB Letters*, No. XXXII, 77.
15. *ibid.*, No. L, 122.
16. *ibid.*, No. LIX, 142.
17. *ibid.*, No. XVI, 29-30.
18. *EW*, 315-34.
19. *ibid.*, 371.
20. *ibid.*, 376-87.
21. *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, XII, Wheaton, The Theosophical Publishing House, 1980, 605-6.
22. *HPB Letters*, No. XXXIII, 78.
23. *ibid.*, No. XIV, 26.
24. *Damodar*, 666.
25. *Lucifer*, August 1890, 509.

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## T. Subba Row and The Secret Doctrine

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A NOTIFICATION in the February 1884 issue of *The Theosophist* says that 'T. Subba Row Garu, B.A., B.L., F.T.S., Councillor of The Theosophical Society and Secretary of its Madras Branch'<sup>1</sup> will assist in the authorship of *The Secret Doctrine*. This was the first official mention of his association with the work. While the 'Historical Introduction' to *The Secret Doctrine* provided by Boris de Zirkoff to the edition brought out in 1978 by the Theosophical Publishing House gives the complete story of its publication, the following is the chronology so far as Subba Row is connected with it:

4 April 1885

HPB writes to HSO saying that Subba Row told her 'to write *The Secret Doctrine* and send to him [TSR] through you every week what I had written'.<sup>2</sup>

6 January 1886 HPB again writes to HSO detailing what TSR can do to help in the work:

Secure the help of Subba [Row] for *Secret Doc. Lots there of Advaitism or old Āryan Religion* occult which if reinforced by what S.R. can add will kill Hodgson and Co. on the spot. Shall he do it for you or rather for himself and Advaitism? If he promises faithfully and you think he will do it I shall send you by two or three chapters at once; if not—I begin publishing here. Let him see first five or six chapt. and judge. We can take the public of India by storm if he helps me with old quotations and occult meanings added to mine.<sup>3</sup>

19 January 1886 HSO writes:

Subba Row will go over it with Oakley and it will be returned to you. He asked if he should be free to add or amend, to which I answered of course, it was for that he was requested to edit it. He then consented.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to A. P. Sinnett, HPB says:

I want you to see and read it for yourself before it passes through the hands of S.R., lest a Hodgson would say again that the *SD* was written by Subba Row as *Isis* presumably was. What I want now is WITNESSES.<sup>5</sup>

14 July 1886 HPB writes to HSO:

S[ubba] R[ow]'s advice will be priceless and if you can make him keep the MSS. no longer than a month it will be excellent.... But you *must* force S.R. to read and not to put it by aside, leaving it at his leisure and pleasure as he always does.<sup>6</sup>

October 1886

The attitude of T. Subba Row was becoming very unfavourable. He was rather moody at times, and his Brāhmanical upbringing was influencing him to a considerable extent. He was against the disclosure of any higher esoteric teachings; his distrust of Occidentals was acute, and he never fully accepted the fact that occult teachings could be given out so freely by a 'woman.'<sup>7</sup>

4 January 1887 HPB writes:

I am glad Subba Row likes my *Proem*.... Let S.R. do what he likes. I give him *carte blanche*.<sup>8</sup>

10 September 1887 HPB writes to G. Subbaiah Chetty:

...Subba Row has even refused through C. Oakley to read or have anything to do [with] my *Secret Doctrine*. I have spent here £ 30 to have it typed, on purpose to send to him and now when all is ready, he refuses to look into it. Of course, it will be a new pretext for him to pitch into and criticize when it does come out. Therefore I will defer its publication.<sup>9</sup>

24 February 1888 HPB writes to HSO:

Now Tookaram writes me a letter. In it he says that S.R. told him he was ready to help me and correct my *SD* provided I took out from it every reference to the Masters! Now, what's this? Does he mean to say that I should *deny* the Masters, or that I do not understand Them and garble the facts They give me, or that *he*, S.R. knows Master's doctrines better than I do? For it can



mean all this. Please take your first opportunity of telling the whole of Adyar as follows:

(1) It is I, who brought in, the first, the existence of our Masters to the world and the TS. I did it because They sent me to do the work and make a fresh experiment in this XIX Century and I have done it, the best I knew how. It may not dovetail with S.R.'s ideas, it answers truth and fact.... And one of the two—I either know Them personally as I have ever maintained; or—I have invented Them and Their doctrines.<sup>10</sup>

Subba Row's name was not mentioned in the letter sent to HPB by a number of American Theosophists or in the reply to it from N. D. Khandalavala and others. But a letter from N. D. Khandalavala dated 12 August 1888 further states the fact that 'the said student of Indian [Esotericism] refused to undertake the task of revising the book or even parts of it'.<sup>11</sup>

The final production of the volumes was greatly delayed but it is said that this had its own 'silver lining'.

20 October 1888 First volume of *The Secret Doctrine* was published.

December 1888 Second volume came out.

Subba Row was extensively quoted in *The Secret Doctrine*. His article 'Twelve Signs of the Zodiac' was made use of, besides his lectures on

the *Bhagavad-gītā* while explaining the term *Mūlaprakriti*. The following extracts express her admiration for him:

The subjoined short article is from the pen of Mr T. Subba Row, a learned Vedāntin scholar. He prefers the Brāhmanical division of the Rāja-Yoga, and from a metaphysical point of view he is quite right. But, as it is a question of simple choice and expediency, we hold in this work to the time-honoured classification of the Trans-Himālayan 'Arhat Esoteric School'.<sup>12</sup> ...see the superb definitions of Parabrahman and the Logos in T. Subba Row's Lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā*.<sup>13</sup>

Subba Row, though he resigned his formal membership of the Society, kept in touch with Adyar and read the theosophical books and journals. He lived for over two years after his resignation and for over a year after *The Secret Doctrine* was published, but there is no record of his response to it, except for his basic objection that it revealed too much 'to the profane'. It is possible that he was really wonderstruck with the scholarly and, at the same time, clear and highly spirited presentation. He thought it too undesirable to be touched by the orthodox.

Though his co-operation, assistance and guidance were not available for this monumental work, it is clear that Madame Blavatsky would have wished his name to be remembered in connection with it, for in addition to the many

references to him in the text, she used one of his sentences to introduce the 'Summing Up' of the first volume.

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#### References:

1. The Theosophist, February 1884; also see Boris de Zirkoff, *Rebirth of the Occult Tradition (Rebirth)*, Adyar, TPH, 1977, 7.
2. *Rebirth*, 7.
3. *ibid.*, 23.
4. *ibid.*, 24.
5. *HPB Letters*, No. LXXXIII, 197.
6. *Rebirth*, 28-9.
7. *ibid.*, 32.
8. *ibid.*, 38.
9. *ibid.*, 45.
10. *ibid.*, 48.
11. *ibid.*, 50.
12. *SD*, I. 211.
13. *ibid.*, III. 311 and 318.

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## The T. Subba Row Medal

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**DURING** 1880, 'The President instituted a Medal of Honour, made of pure silver and suitably engraved, which was to be awarded annually to the Indian author of the best essay upon any subject connected with their ancient religions, philosophies or sciences, preferably the occult or mystical branch of science as known and practised by the ancients. He appointed a committee of four Indians as judges – one each in Bombay, Madras, Poona and Calcutta. The essays sent in were not found worthy of the distinction, so the idea went into abeyance till 1883, when the Subba Row Medal was established....'<sup>1</sup>

The Madras Theosophical Society was established in 1882 with Subba Row as its secretary. The International Headquarters was also moved to Adyar in Madras during the later part of the year. Colonel Olcott records that the presence of Subba Row at Madras was one of the factors for this choice.



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## Epilogue

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**S**UBBA ROW'S life in this incarnation was short but very purposeful. He lived in a peculiarly transitory period of Indian history. Learned in the traditional knowledge, he also acquired a fine English education and surpassed all his contemporaries in his attainments related to occult science and arcane wisdom.

Like many intellectuals of his time, he could not, for historical reasons, reconcile himself or coexist with Europeans. His deep-rooted prejudices were strong and they sometimes deterred him from following suggestions of even his spiritual teachers.

After a century now, there is perhaps no purpose in speculating what the course of events would have been, had his behaviour been different. He acted according to his lights. But, no doubt, the things that happened and the reactions to them are all pointers to future generations as to how and how not to respond.

A chela under probation is allowed to think and do whatever he likes. He is warned and told beforehand: 'You will be tempted and deceived by appearances; two paths will be open before you, both leading to the goal you are trying to attain; one easy, and that will lead you more rapidly to the fulfilment of orders you may receive; the other – more arduous, more long; a path full of stones and thorns that will make you stumble more than once on your way; and, at the end of which you may, perhaps, find failure after all and be unable to carry out the orders given for some particular small work, but, whereas the latter will cause the hardships you have undergone on it to be all carried to the side of your credit in the long run, the former, the easy path, can offer you but a momentary gratification, an easy fulfilment of the task.' The chela is at perfect liberty, *and often quite justified from the standpoint of the appearances* – to suspect his Guru of being 'a fraud' as the elegant word stands. More than that: the greater, the sincerer his indignation – whether expressed in words or boiling in his heart – the more fit he is, the better qualified to become an *Adept*.<sup>1</sup>

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### Reference:

1. *ML*, No. 30, 227-8.

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## Chronology of Events

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- 6 July 1856      TSR born at Kakinada (now in the state of Andhra Pradesh)  
Father: T. Veera Venkata Narayana (died: 1857)  
Brought up by mother under the guardianship of maternal grandfather and uncle.  
Maternal uncle: Digavalli Venkata Sivarao, Diwan of Rajah of Pithapuram (a native state)
- 1866              Subba Row's child-wife died of cholera.
- 1872              Passed matriculation as a student of Hindu College, Kakinada.
- 1872-76          Studied in Presidency College, Madras. Secured Lord Elphinstone prize (Rs. 70) for English essay; Bourdillon Prize for Telugu (Rs. 25); Maharajah of Vizianagaram Prize (Rs.20) for English essay for Hindus; Obtained a monthly scholarship of Rs.12. (Lord Elphinstone scholarship).

- 1876              Passed B.A. with a First class (Madras University).  
A note in the college records says: (B.A.) 'Obtained a number of marks which has been rarely reached in the annals of the University.'
- 1876              Married Sundaramma, daughter of his maternal uncle.
- 1877-78          Worked as Registrar, Baroda High Court.
- 1878-80          Studied Law at Madras; passed fourth in the class.
- 1880              Apprenticeship with Messrs Grant and Laing. Enrolled as an Advocate, High Court, Madras.
- 1882              Met the Founders of the Theosophical Society.
- 25 April 1882    Admitted to membership of the TS at a private function.
- 1886              Delivered convention lectures on the *Bhagavad-gītā*.
- 1887              Resigned from membership of the TS.
- 24 June 1890    Died at Madras after severe illness.

#### THE AUTHOR

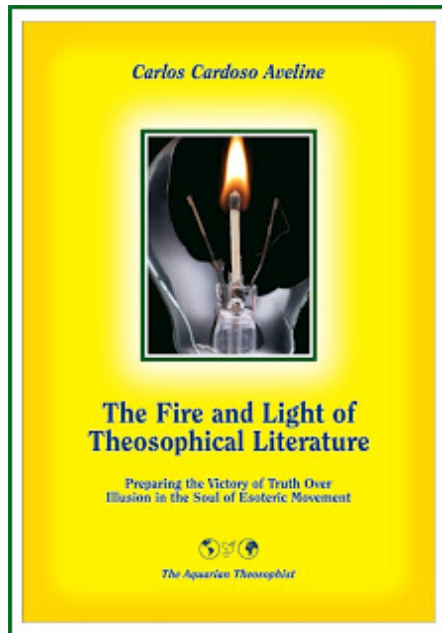
N. C. Ramanujachary, M.A. (Political Science), Bachelor of Law, born in 1935 at Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, India, is a long-standing member of the Theosophical Society. A member of the Authors Guild of India, he is well known as a short-story writer in Telugu, with the *nom de plume* SRIVIRINCHI.

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The End of “A Lonely Disciple”.

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On the role of the esoteric movement in the ethical awakening of mankind during the 21st century, see the book “**The Fire and Light of Theosophical Literature**”, by Carlos Cardoso Aveline.



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