

DEATH OF T. SUBBA ROW, B.A., B.L.

Henry Steele Olcott

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The announcement, I am now compelled to make of the death of this brilliant young Indian mystical philosopher will shock the Theosophical reading public. Wherever our work has extended, there has his reputation spread. He was an intellectual phenomenon, and his mental history goes as far as anything conceivable to support the theory of palingenesis. The facts bearing upon the case, as I derived them from his venerable mother on the day of the cremation, will presently be given. When he last visited the Head-quarters, the first week in April last, the mysterious cutaneous disease to which he ultimately succumbed, had begun to show itself in an outbreak of boils. Neither he nor either of us dreamt that it was at all serious. But shortly after he had to keep to his room, then to his lounge, and he never went out again save once, when he was taken to a different house for change of air. In the beginning of June he sent me a touching request to come and see him, which of course, I did. He was a piteous sight: his body a mass of sores from crown to sole, and he not able to bear even a sheet over him, nor to lie in any comfortable position, not get sound sleep. He was depressed and despairing, and begged me to try if I could not help him a little by mesmerism. I did try with all my will, and it seemed with some success, for he began to mend from that evening, and at my third visit he and I thought he was convalescent, and so informed his unhappy family. But suddenly there came a relapse, his disease finished its course rapidly, and, on Tuesday, the 24th June, at 10 p.m., he expired, without a word or a sign to those about him.

The last worldly business he attended to was to declare on the morning of 24th instant in the presence of his relatives and friends, among them, Dewan Bahadur P. Shrinivasa Rao, that he had authorized his wife to adopt a son after his death—there being no issue of his marriage.

At noon on that day, 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. When he died, a great star fell from the firmament of Indian contemporary thought. Between Subba Row, H. P. Blavatsky, Damodar 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 Row was in confidential understanding with us about Damodar'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 Row told me of this long ago, and reverted to the subject the other day at one of my visits to his sick-bed. A dispute—due in a measure to third parties—which widened into a breach, arose between H. P. B. and himself about certain philosophical questions, but to the last he spoke of her, to us and to his family, in the old friendly way. When we last saw each other we had a long talk about esoteric philosophy, and he said that as soon as he could get out, he should come to Headquarters and draft several metaphysical questions that he wished Mr. Fawcett to discuss with him in *The Theosophist*. His interest in our movement was unabated to the last, he read *The Theosophist* regularly and was a subscriber to H. P. B.'s *Lucifer*.

Our great Vedantin was of the Niyogi caste of the Smartha (Advaita) Brahmans. He was born on the 6th July 1856. At the time of his death he was aged but nearly 34 years. His native country was the Godavery District on the Coromandal Coast of India; his vernacular tongue the Telugu.

His grandfather was the Sheristedar of the District, and his maternal uncle was Dewan (Prime Minister) to the Rajah of Pittapur. His father died when he was but six months' baby, and the uncle brought him up. He first attended the Coconada Hindu School, where he was not at all suspected of possessing any surprising talent. He passed his first Matriculation examination at the Hindu School, Coconada, then under the direction of Mr. J. Kenny. From thence he passed in 1872, into the Madras Presidency College, where his career was a brilliant one, and ended in his passing B.A. in 1876 as the first of the University in his class. In the latter part of the same year that astute statesman, Sir T. Madhava Row, then Dewan of Baroda, offered him the Registrarship of the High Court of that State, and Subba Row stopped there about a year, but then returned to Madras and prepared himself for and passed the B.L. examination, number 4 in the class. Having adopted 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 lucrative, and might have been made much more so had he given less attention to philosophy; however, as he told me, he was drawn by an irresistible attraction. As an example of his extraordinary cleverness, his friends cite his successful passing of the examination in geology for the Statutory Civil Service in 1885, though it was a new subject to him, and he had had only a week for preparation. He leaves a young widow of 24 years, and an aged mother—herself a learned Brahman lady—who mourns the loss of her great son, the pride of her soul, most bitterly. The cremation took place at 9 o'clock on the morning after his death. Our brother, Judge P. Sreeuivas Row, was with him at the last, and T. Vijiaraghava Charlu saw him two hours before the event occurred.

It is remarked above that T. Subba Row gave no early signs of possessing mystical knowledge: even Sir T. Madhava Row did not suspect it in him while he was serving under him at Baroda. 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 Damodar, 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 recognized 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 Gita, Brahma Sutras 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 Gita before the T. S. Convention of 1886 at Adyar, can well believe this, so perfect seemed his mastery of that peerless work. For a man of his abilities, he left scarcely any monument; the paper he contributed to these pages and the one-volume Report of his four Adyar Lectures being almost his entire literary remains. 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.

[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."]