



“Dr. Annie Besant (1893 -1933) and Her Roleplay to Socio-Politics Reform”

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Abstract:

Dr. Annie Besant was a mighty spirit. She went round the world frequently and inspired millions of people through lucid speeches. By her many sided activities and relentless work, Annie Besant had almost become a legend in her own time. She influenced a generation of great persons all over who included great thinkers and scholars, by her magnificent acumen. Motilal Nehru became a Theosophist as a result of Annie Besant's influence over him. Later he became an active Home Leaguer in Allahabad. Many statesmen and great leaders like Mohd. Ali, Jinna, Srinivasa Iyer, C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer etc., was influenced by her. Most of them became active participants in Home Rule league later. For most Indians, Dr. Besant was known as 'Mother'. She had many affectionate titles like Bari Mem Sahib The big European Lady. In south, people called and adored her as 'Vasanthamma' and 'Anna Bai'. Together with her national educational social and cultural work and woman suffrage movement, Annie Besant added the Home Rule Movement into her national programme, after being inspired by the Irish Home Rule movement. She made efforts to unite different wings in Indian politics. She brought Gokhale and Tilak together on to a single political platform. She caused the Lucknow pact which brought the Hindu Muslim leaders together and tried to bring the Home Rule League and Congress together. She was the first lady to preside over the Indian National Congress. She was the first to plead for Dominion Status and she had taken her own 'Commonwealth of Indian Bill' even up to the House of Commons in London. Dr. Besant was not a mere individual. She was a multi-dimensional character. She was an incessant crusader for human dignity, freedom and brotherhood. History has had very few parallels like Dr. Annie Besant who with her Universalism, religious toleration and respect for human rights never hesitated to revolt against racial discrimination, oppression and exploitation. At a time when aping of the west was the order of the day in India, Dr. Besant taught people how to stand on their own with courage and conviction against all odds. It is no exaggeration to say that the self confidence she inculcated among the Indians stood in good stead in their fight against the British during their struggle for freedom.

Introduction:

The life and career of Dr. Annie Besant has been an enigma by itself. Born and brought up in England, Dr. Besant adopted India as her homeland and incessantly strived for rousing Indian nationalism at a time when British colonial rule was averse to the cause of Indian Independence. She launched several movements like Home Rule in support of the natives. As a Theosophist, she authored and spread the concept of National Education. She served as the President of Indian National Congress and was in the eye of several tumultuous political and social movements. She incurred the wrath of few powerful sections for opposing Gandhi under whose leadership the Indian national movement then was carried. Dr. Besant herself a prolific writer, was a subject for many books and treatises. However, she and her work continue to evoke intense feelings among the contemporary commentators. Annie Besant, an Irish by birth, became a Theosophist and since she visited India for the time, she adopted herself to India which she considered as her motherland. She had won public recognition as a great leader in several reform movements in the west by her outstanding oratorical gifts. Her numerous writings reflect her comprehensive understanding of religious, social, philosophic and political subjects. Dr. Annie Besant came to be acquainted with the works of Charles Bradlaugh. She joined the 'Free Thought Society' and worked as speaker and lectured on behalf of her colleagues like Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, Mr. and Mrs. Bland and Graham Walls. She along with others spread her ideas through lectures on social justice and political reform. Mrs. Besant lead an agitation for an 'Eight hours day' for factory workers and she strived for the children of dock-workers. She protested against unfair wages and illegal deductions from wages of match workers.



She formed a Match Maker Union for better conditions of the workers. Annie Besant, ever since she became a Theosophist, remained as Mme. Blavatsky's prime disciple. She arrived in India to work for Theosophy. Col Olcott was the founder president of the society till he died. He was succeeded in his office by Dr. Annie Besant. As the President of the Society, she rendered great services in various fields like political, social, religious and educational. She also worked for the enlightenment of the Indian people through the Theosophical Society. Col. Olcott aspired for the revival of Indian national feeling by his relentless work for the spread of Theosophy. During his extensive tours in India, great enthusiasm was aroused by his lectures. Numerous branches of the Society were brought into existence in various parts of the country. Many scholars and libraries were organised by Theosophical Branches in Madras Presidency by the end of 19th century and early 20th century. Col. Olcott's intensive campaign in promoting the ideas of Theosophy truly provided the much required scope for Annie Besant to further consolidate the movement. He made a ground work for the spread of Theosophy in India which Annie Besant could strengthen and consolidate during her active period of life. When Dr. Besant came to India, with her deep understanding of the spirit of Indian culture threw a good deal of her energy into revival of the glory of the ancient days of India. She utilised her energy and inspiration bringing about a new consciousness in every field of humanity. She worked for making Theosophy as a way of life. Dr. Annie Besant's underscoring of India's past glory and civilisation was a part of her strategy. She devoted herself to social reform from her early career. Dr. Besant strongly felt that the recognition of Indian womanhood depended on India's awakening. She had delivered her first lecture based on the theme that emancipation of women solely depended on the freedom of the people. She pleaded that liberty, equality and fraternity were the need of the day. In order to achieve her aim, she established girls school to bring women out of the shell of 'Pardah'. She encouraged active participation of women in all social, political and educational fields. She had been the champion and advocate of Indian political rights, religious and cultural values besides being that champion of women's position and their education. She revolted against taboos, meaningless customs and conventions. She believed that women could be custodians of the civilization and culture for Indian. Dr. Besant gave much importance for girls' education. She suggested that the Indian girl should have acquaintance with Indian literature, history and other subjects. She revolted against child marriages. She strongly opined that the future of India as a nation depended on the abolition of Child marriages. In order to achieve her object, she carried on social reform activities and organised various societies to propagate against child marriage and caste system; but favouring foreign travel, promotion of education for girls and depressed classes. One of her major achievements was to establish the educational trust under Theosophical Society and another society for national education, to promote the national, free and secular education in India.

Dr. Besant was an educationalist with high aims and ideals. She emphasised on the need for India to develop a national spirit to take its place among the nations of the world and to develop educational methods founded on Indian ideals. She became the founder of National Education under the name of the Society for promotion of National Education. She brought a new spirit in the country and worked tirelessly for the promotion of education. When Mrs. Besant came to India for the first time she found that those who had modern education on western lines were beginning to be materialistic and looked down on their ancient faith with indifference. They were carried away by the glamour of western civilisation and apologetic about their own national culture. Basically her plan of education had two distinct aspects: One was the religious foundation and the other was patriotism. She recognised that the awakening of India's national life should be based on religion and spirituality. Theosophy emphasised on four important principles of education, viz., religious, mental, moral and physical development. According to Dr. Annie Besant, absence of any one of these elements results in an imperfect and unscientific system of education. Till almost the end of her career Besant directed and inspired the system of Theosophical education. She shaped and moulded its policy and energised true education for humanity. As the president of Indian National Congress at Calcutta Session, she got opportunity of planning out a system of National education in India. Her idea of national education had three features. She wanted that the University should breath Indian spirit, when the western system was the order of the day, and that scientific education should be taught to Indian youth. The second feature was that the religious education should form an integral part of curriculum. The third feature was that education should train students for individual success and for the country. Dr. Besant strongly believed that the chief educational want of India was colleges run on national lines and under national control. The children should grow up through their school and college life in an atmosphere of pure and passionate patriotism, full of pride in their country and full of aspiration for her service. She had clearly stated that, the work is to train citizens for a free India and not clerks for the British bureaucracy.

The four-fold system of education for boys and girls as envisaged by Dr. Annie Besant reveals significant aspects of the system of education under Theosophy. The division of education into religious, emotional (moral



and mental) physical and environmental subjects provided wholistic approach to the development of the student's personality. The weight age given to religious teaching is aimed at imparting spiritual qualities to the learners. The equal encouragement has been given to the study of noble faiths of each religion depending on the religion of the students. It is doubtless to say that such a step was initiated to promote religious harmony in a righteous direction right from the student hood. Under the scheme of moral and mental development, study of languages, science, mathematics, psychology and training in moral and aesthetic values have been encouraged. Theosophical education made an attempt to train students with emphasis on 'totality' of human development. Another important ingredient of Theosophical education was instruction in the physiology of sex to the students under instruction as a part of physical education. It was to inculcate a humanistic approach and respect for each gender, and also designed to promote healthy relations between opposite sexes and to drive away notions of gender discrimination. This aspect assumes gender importance in the light of the plight of female members of Indian society. The inclusion of environment aspects of school curriculum was to create a rightful awareness of environment in the process of learning which was highly innovative in the system of Theosophical education. The concept of four-fold education under Theosophy provided the much required scope for the development of physical, mental and emotional character of students. Theosophy's main objective and cherished ideal was to train students as future citizens even when they are under instruction. This wholistic approach to education of children was a major contribution under Theosophical education would. For Theosophy, education was not a mere academic exercise. Rather, it was considered as a system which would beget future citizens empowered with knowledge and upright personality to serve the society with touch humanity. The crowning achievement of Dr. Besant's contribution in educational field was the establishment of the Central Hindu College in Banaras, which was affiliated to Allahabad University. The aim of the college was to teach the deep truths of Hindu religion while seeking to unite the best of Indian culture, with the best of western principles of education. With her characteristic vigour and determination and as an idealistic educationalist, Dr. Besant founded the Theosophical Educational Trust (TET). A number of Schools were started by the Theosophical Educational Trust at places like Madras, Kumbakonam, Coimbatore, Bangalore, Madanapalle etc. The Theosophical Educational Trust was to train students in a way that would make them complete human beings and responsible citizens. The Theosophical Society realised the importance of education for down trodden sections of the society. This is proved by the fact that several schools were opened for panchamas at Madras, Madanapalle and Nellore. Theosophy Society became the forerunner of Gandhi who in the post-1920 period laid great emphasis on *HARIJANA UPLIFTMENT*. A large number of Theosophical institutions like the National Women's College Banaras, the National College in Hyderabad (Sindh) now in Pakistan, Wood National College in Madanapalle, the college of Agricultural and commerce and also the training college at Madras were affiliated to the new National University.

The Theosophical education was devoted to the overall development of students based on various subjects and religious principles as enshrined in world religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Theosophical education is a synthesis of western form and Indian thought. While it adopted the western mode of English education, it deviated from the British education in so far as it included subjects like science, environment, and physical training and moral science based on the enlightened principles of Indian faith. The system of education as envisaged by Theosophy is a healthy combination of religious morals and academic excellence. It is a unique venture in the field of learning which tried to blend the ideals of Theosophy and Indian Culture. The system endeavored to channelize human life through a new mode of learning. Whatever may be the short comings, it was a bold attempt to achieve a synthesis of the best elements of indigenous tradition and principles of contemporary and modern education. The need for such a synthesis is greater now than it was during the active life of Dr. Annie Besant. Mrs. Besant was an able organiser, a gifted journalist and a great orator of her generation who devoted herself to social reform from the very childhood. She worked strenuously in India with her powerful pen and golden voice that contributed for the awakening of new India. The gift of lucid speech has placed Mrs. Besant in the front rank of women orators in the world. She had great passion for human freedom and sympathy for the low and down trodden. She was guided and directed by her idealistic sense of responsibility for the greater interests of the nation and the world in the promotion of peace and order. Dr. Besant travelled on behalf of Theosophical Society. By her endless tours throughout the length and breadth of the country, speaking from hundreds of platforms inspired thousands of men and women. By her eloquent speeches, she trained the youth for citizenship, rich in religion, the perfect sense of patriotism, practical efficiency for honorable livelihood and useful service. She strongly supported that Theosophy was the underlying truth of every religion. She travelled round the country with her object that Theosophy was identical with the teachings of ancient scriptures and spreading that knowledge throughout the world. She awakened the youth by her silver tongue and oratory skill. Her speeches focused on the greatness of the culture and religion in India. As an organiser Mrs. Besant established various organisations to provide a systematic training to Indian



youth to make them patriotic citizens. She relentlessly worked for secular education, political awareness in society and problems related to women's upliftment. In order to achieve her aim, Mrs. Besant established various organizations throughout the country. Ever since she became the president of Theosophical Society, Mrs. Besant rendered great service for the cause of Theosophy. She founded "The Theomorphic Order of Service" and "Order of Sons and Daughters of India". To promote Theosophical education, she encouraged the establishment of Young Men's Association and she was the first president of Women's Indian Association. Apart from these, she established a debating society known as 'Madras Parliament' and Mock Parliament which taught the parliamentary norms aiming at Home Rule. Dr. Besant founded the 'Indian Scout Movement' to bring every citizen to do his duty to the country and to be kind towards his fellow citizens.

Dr. Besant herself was well known as an author. The amount of literary work turned out from her pen was enormous. She published several articles, pamphlets magazines and books. She wrote incessantly on religion, philosophy, service politics etc. She collaborated in writing a number of books, pamphlets and translated books and edited in some periodicals during her life time. *The Commonwealth* and *New India* were the main life-line of propoganda of her views on politics, education and Social reform. By her outstanding literary ability, the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred on her by the Central Hindu University, Banaras. Dr. Besant was a multifaced personality. She worked relentlessly in all areas of human activity. As a great orator, she conscientiously used her oratorical powers for the welfare of the people. The range of her intellect and organisational capacity was of high order devoted to the service and welfare of the Indians. From the beginning of her career, Mrs. Annie Besant had been a Home-Ruler whether in the case of Ireland or South Africa or India. She had been a passionate opponent of all injustice to the weaker sections and never hesitated to express her opposition to the Government of the day. A strong factor of influence for her entry into the political arena was her Irish background. Annie Besant was brought up in an Irish atmosphere which was dominated by strong sentiments of liberty, freedom of speech and fundamental human rights. She embodied such liberal traditions during her formative years that she had been endeavored in her ability to be guided in politics. Her inexhaustible energy and tireless industry, her alertness and courageous optimism paved the way for carrying constructive methods in Indian politics. Mrs. Annie Besant's participation in Indian politics synchronized with the commencement of the World War-I. She contributed for two great conceptions with all progressive movements in the country.

The main object of Home Rule Movement was to achieve self-government for India through the constitutional methods. By the efforts of Annie Besant, the Bombay session had witnessed unification of Congress. The Bombay session was also significant as it marked the beginning of great fraternization between Hindus and Muslims. Mrs. Besant took prominent role to unify the two communities, of Hindus and Muslims. Mrs. Besant and Tilak reviewed political unity in the entire country through the Home Rule agitation. The All India Home Rule League commenced its work with Besant as its president and C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer as its General Secretary. The strong base of the league was South where the Theosophical Society members spread the Home Rule message. Mrs. Besant took active part on student affairs through the organisation of Boy Scouts, Mock-Parliaments, libraries and reading rooms. These were introduced for creating the political consciousness among the youth. The establishment of the 'Madras Parliament', debating society was to teach the youth the parliamentary forms and methods. Mrs. Besant built up for the Home Rule League an emotional mass support. The Indian National Congress was an auxiliary of the Home Rule League because of her inspiring leadership. The nationalist congressmen desired that Mrs. Besant should preside over the 31st session of Indian National Congress, held at Lucknow. But she was to be the choice for the next session to be held at Calcutta. Mrs. Besant and Tilak made the Lucknow session a grand success. It was in a way a conference of moderates, extremists and Home Rulers. Mrs. Besant helped to formulate the congress leagues scheme passed by the Lucknow session. Mrs. Besant was exteined by the Government of Bombay, so that she could not enter Bombay presidency. The Central Provinces also exteined her. The Government of Madras interned her. But there was such a powerful reaction in India following on her internment that within three months, British policy had to be changed. As soon as she was released, the popular wave of enthusiasm was roused. She was elected to preside over the 32 session of the Indian National Congress. But Mrs. Besant was almost side lined in political scene in India after Calcutta session because of her insistence on the need to obey the law and to shun non-cooperation. Besant's methods to attain freedom for India were by way of intense and well organised constitutional agitation. She felt that non-cooperation was to bring a deadlock in the functioning of government and civil disobedience would lead to disturbance. She strongly advocated the British connection and India's place as an equal member in the British Parliament. Members of various Theosophical lodges in the Madras Presidency were necessarily drawn from educated middle classes of the upper stratum of Hindu caste hierarchy. This was not strange in the contemporary society as most of the movements, both social and religious, originating in mid-19th century had



to primarily depend on these sections. The new political regime under the colonial power created an atmosphere where the early Indian tradition of learning lost its grip giving way to new English education. Given the fact that the operational aspects of new colonial economy and new national market threw open jobs only for English-knowing people; most members from traditional upper castes in the Hindu society took to new education. The consequent contact with western knowledge provided enough scope for the new educated sections to vitality view both the cultural traditions, Indian and Western. It was this middle class which shouldered the responsibility of effecting change in contemporary society. It is against this background that the social base of any mid-19th century social movements may be viewed. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain the association of large number of educated middle classes with the contemporary movements. The Theosophical Society attracted people from the middle class also. Majority of the members belonged to upper caste, who by then acquired proficiency in English language surpassing other castes. They were followed by learned sections from the other non-Brahmin castes like Vaisyas. Given the negligible percentage of literacy among other lower castes, there is no evidence to show that members from these castes were enrolled in large numbers into Theosophical lodges. As a result, the social base of Theosophy in Madras Presidency remained confined to a few elite sections in the society. This did not hamper the activities of various Theosophical lodges. They were multi-dimensional which included social service of the members apart from other avocations like propagation of lofty principles in traditional Hindu scriptures. That the Theosophical movement initiated attempts at imparting modern English to down-trodden people in the city of Madras attests this fact. The narrow social base of the movement proved to be a major hurdle for the organisers to take it to the grassroots level. Till a time when Theosophy was given a political dimension by Annie Besant, the base of the movement remained confined to a few sections. Though this does not amount to say that it was more in traditional mould of Indian civilization and moderate in its views, its emphasis on abstract ethical values and its failure in understanding faced by common people limited its operations to certain sections of the contemporary society. Dr. Annie Besant is one of the great personalities of the world who has rendered public service to humanity. She was a marvelous personage in the combination of the different qualities of enthusiasm, eloquence, power of organisation, courage, energy, determination, optimism and faith. She was Irish by birth, English by marriage and Indian by adoption. She rendered her great services to social, educational, religious, political and humanitarian spheres of work for Indian awakening. She devoted herself to social reform from her very childhood. Her work in connection with Fabian Society, preaching the equal status for women. She strenuously toiled for the Match Factory-working girls. She faced great odds in the publication of knowlton pamphlet wherein she came out triumphantly in all the courts of justice. She was born as a Christian, turned an athiest, freethinker, and a Fabian materialist, socialist and became a Theosophist.

Since, she joined the Theosophical Society; her services were to all the countries of the world. She has thrown light on various religions of the world under the banner of universal brotherhood, love and truth. She strove for liberty of thought. She was undaunted fighter for human liberty and worked to noble causes for oppressed from the social and economic slavery and was an upholder of the cause of the weak and down trodden. Dr. Besant fought for Indian liberty. She worked with unsurpassed devotion and tireless energy in all spheres towards the shaping of new India. She strove towards the building up for new civilization. She created Indian spirit and tried to eliminate the barriers in society. Her marvelous grasp of human nature made her to make a person as useful citizen and honoured member of his race. Her intense love of freedom and her passionate sacrifice for the sake of truth were exemplary. She became a champion of freedom for India. Annie Besant was one of the great religious reformers who revived Hinduism from its roots. Before she landed in India, Dr. Annie Besant was to give lucid speech on ancient Hindu religion along with her Theosophical Doctrines at the world parliament of Religions in Chicago. She was one of the first to take the massage of Hindu philosophy of yoga, the Sankhya and the transmigration of soul. She was the first western philosopher who spread Indian mythological tenets to the other lands. Annie Besant was a prolific writer and journalist. She wrote profusely in *National Reformer*. She worked in *The Link* that was started with humanitarian ideas by william stead and others. In India she ran the Theosophical bulletins like *The Theosophist*, *Adyar Bulletin*, etc. with great success. After she plunged into politics, she wrote a series of strring articles in *New India* and *The Commonweal*.

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