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A feminist and a radical at heart: Dr. Annie Besant (1847-1933)

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Abstract

The freedom struggle of India had many great male stalwarts like M. K. Gandhi, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Govind. B. Pant, Vallab Bhai Patel and many others. Gandhi ji realized the need to support and encourage the Indian women to join the freedom struggle, which resulted in many women coming to the forefront of the freedom struggle. Apart from them, there were a few foreign women who came to India and made it their home. They became naturalized Indians, serving India and participated wholeheartedly in the freedom struggle. One such female stalwart was Dr. Annie Besant. This paper explores her contribution to India, its women and the freedom struggle.

Keywords: Women, Indian politics, home rule league, theosophist

Introduction

In 1914, the clarion call "wake up India" was given by Mrs. Annie Besant, who entered Indian politics in order to arouse the people to work for their salvation by releasing their girls from 'illiteracy and child-marriage', by liberating their outcastes from all religious and social degradation and by freeing the whole nation from the foreign yoke (Cousins, 1941, 27) ^[4]. Dressed in a pure white sari, with snow-white hair and a beautiful voice, Mrs. Besant was a well-known and well-loved figure all over India and particularly at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad (Nanda, 1962, 130) ^[6]. In January 1914, she started a weekly paper, the *Commonweal*, from Madras and six months later, she bought a daily paper and re-christened it *New India*. She wanted to reunite the Extremists with the Indian National Congress as they had been expelled after the Surat split, but the Moderates led by Pherozeshah Mehta were wary of the dynamic old lady and feared that a new organisation would weaken the Indian National Congress. As nothing favourable was in sight and the deaths of Pherozeshah Mehta and Gokhale in 1915, made Mrs. Besant take the plunge alone.

In September 1916, Mrs. Besant founded the All India Home Rule League. In April 1916, Tilak had started his Home Rule League in Poona and concentrated on Western and Central India. The leaders of both leagues worked in harmony (Nanda, 1998, 106) ^[7] A branch of the Home Rule League was set up in England which published one of Mrs. Besant's booklet '*India, A Nation*', which was withdrawn under official pressure. The editor of *The Times*, Geoffrey Dawson in a private letter to the Viceroy, referred to Mrs. Annie Besant as an "obstreperous old harridan" (*The History of The Times*, 184) and *The Times* dismissed the Home Rule League movement as one that 'need not perhaps be taken seriously' (*New India*, 1916). But the movement was spreading like a forest fire and the Viceroy was being pressed by the provincial governments to give a clear lead on the policy to be adopted towards Home Rule. The Governor of Madras, Lord Pentland decided to silence Mrs. Besant by forfeiting securities from her journals, by imposing restrictions on the movement of her workers and by issuing orders under the Defense of India Rules on June 16th, 1917, for her internment in Ootacamund and Coimbatore along with J.P. Wadia, assistant editor of *New India* and G.S. Arundale, a popular contributor to that paper (Nanda, 108).

Dr. Annie Besant's Firsts

After starting the Home Rule League in September 1916, which served to mobilise sections of urban middle class women in the country, Annie Besant became the first woman president of the Calcutta Congress in December 1917, as her popularity soared after her release from internment (Nanda, 135). In May 1917, the first women's association was founded in India by her. Mrs. Annie Besant was its President, Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajadasa was its

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Honorary Secretary for eight years, after which the post was held by Mrs. M. E. Cousins, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Mrs. Ammu Swaminadhan, Mrs. Dadhabhoy and Mrs. Ambujammal (Cousins, 30). The Women's India Association had forty-eight branches by 1921, which increased to eighty-seven branches by 1930 (30). The aim of the association was to be All-India in scope and non-sectarian in nature. After the death of Mrs. Annie Besant, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi became its President.

The Women's India Association championed the cause for woman's suffrage. Stalwarts like Mrs. Besant, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Herabai Tata and Miss Mithan Tata Bar-at-law were so convincing in their arguments that "Parliament decided to consider votes for Indian woman as a 'Domestic Subject', which Indian Provincial Legislature might settle for themselves, the official Government members being left free to vote as they like. The Women's India Association also printed a monthly magazine 'Stri Dharma' under the stewardship of Mrs. M. E. Cousins, who was the Honorary Secretary of the Association (40).

Mrs. Annie Besant - The Early Years

Annie Besant, the daughter of Dr. William Wood and Emily Morris was born on October 1, 1847. At the age of nineteen she married Rev. Frank Besant and had two children. However, she was extremely unhappy as her independent spirit clashed with the traditional views of her husband, ending in a legal separation. But for her, marriage was not the end but the beginning of her story, "a situation that is evident in Marriage As It was, As It Is, And As It Should Be: A Plea For Reform (1878)....." (Saville, 1970, 13)^[12].

She completely rejected Christianity and joined the Secular Society in 1874, where she met Charles Bradlaugh. She described her meeting him "as friends not as strangers..." and that "the instinctive friendliness was in very truth an outgrowth of strong friendship in other lives...." (Besant, 1885, 116-117)^[2]. While Bradlaugh represented republicanism and atheism, Besant represented transgression and both attitudes were not compatible with the dominant feelings of the Victorian society.

She championed the cause of feminism and free thought. Through the pamphlet *The Legalisation of Female Slavery in England* (1876), she portrayed herself as a form of resistance and questioned the myth of feminine chastity, as well as the duality of Victorian sexual values, which forgot the nobility of sexual morality on man and woman "alike" (Saville, 40). Along with Bradlaugh, she published Charles Knowlton's 'Fruit of Philosophy' advocating birth control which eventually led to a trial in 1877, under the Obscene Publication Act 1857 (Nethercot, 1960, 163)^[8]. Her radical orations and actions created obstacles for her in the sphere of education. In spite of having been given honours on her botany examinations by Thomas Huxley, she was not allowed to use the Royal Botanic Gardens by its curator for further studies on the grounds that his daughters often used the same and he did not want them to come in contact with her (Nethercot, 1961, 189)^[9]. Her criticism of orthodox religion earned her the ire of one of the examiners who forewarned her of her failure in spite of her doing the examination brilliantly as he harboured strong antipathy towards her atheism and certain activities for the masses, which he considered to be immoral (189).

During her lifetime trek from Evangelism to Free Thought and Fabianism, she called the year 1889, as 'a-never-to-be-

forgotten year, as she was "dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole" and all her 'puzzles, niddles, problems seemed to disappear' (Besant, 1893, 45)^[3]. She also contributed to the creation of a new political force toward the granting of Home Rule to Ireland and later to India, where she came to the forefront of agitation for women's education (Said, 1994, 264)^[11]. She started the Central Hindu School in Benares, which ultimately merged into the Hindu University (Majumdar, 1988, 876)^[5].

On her arrival in India, she completely immersed herself in the affairs of the Theosophical Society, which she later headed. Her lectures on the unity of Hindu, Christian and Theosophic teaching, was music to the ears of the elite, who were smarting under the rule of the very same tribe to which she belonged. She had personally initiated the thirteen-year old Jawahar Lal Nehru into theosophy (Nanda, 104). The Theosophical Society had many branches all over India, which led to many social and religious reforms especially in South India. In its attempt to revert to some of the old usages and beliefs including occult mysticism, it led to the alienation of many and even gave rise to opposition. One such opponent was Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, who challenged her to an open debate regarding the 'unknowable' God of the Bible and the Upanishad and succeeded in proving her wrong (Animananda, 1946, 3-4)^[1].

Though Mrs. Besant did not see eye to eye with Gandhiji over the Freedom Movement, she contributed tremendously to the cause of India's independence from British rule and was considered a true daughter of Mother India. She died on September 20th, 1933 at Adyar, Madras. She was born a revolutionary, who was a champion of all the wars against injustice, especially toward women.

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