

ANNIE BESANT (1847-1933)

A. B. NADGOUDA
Devchand College, Arjunnagar

Abstract:

Mrs. Annie Besant, a dynamic personality in Indian history was born on 1st October 1847 in London. Her parents were William Page Wood and Emily Morris. She lost her father at the age of five and faced many difficulties in her childhood (1) Though she married to a clergyman Frank Besant in 1867 she was forced to leave her husband at the age of 25. (2) Then she rejected Christianity and joined the secular society.

KEYWORDS:

Annie Besant , dynamic personality , history , secular society.

INTRODUCTION:

It was a turning point in her life when she met Mr. Bradlaugh in 1874. Both were atheists. Hence she turned into a Theosophist. During her association with Mr. Bradlaugh, she showed herself to be a great organizer, a writer and a great thinker.

Mrs. Besant came to India on 16th November, 1893 as a member of the Theosophical society. She confined her activities to religious, social and educational fields which identified her with the movement of Hindu revivalism. Her translation of 'Bhagwad Gita in English brought her fame among the Indians.(3)

Annie Besant was at England From 1908 to 1913. She was attracted by the Home Rule Movement started by Redmond in Ireland. She thought of starting a similar Movement in India.

Annie Besant started a daily paper in Madras namely "New India" to build up a vigorous movement for Home Rule in 1914. (4)

Besant earned a very good name and fame within a short period. She expressed her view on the Indian politics through a meekly journal 'Commonwealth' and a newspaper 'New India'. (5) It is interesting to note that the first Congress was presided over by a Hindu, the second by a Parasi, and the third by a Muslim. Similarly the thirty – second by a Irish lady. Annie Besant.

In 1915 she became active in Indian politics. In the same year she tried to bring about a compromise between the extremists the moderates, but failed. However, her efforts were successful in 1916. (6)

She was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1917. She was in favour of Swadeshi but did not want to use the same as political weapon. She was opposed to the boycott of British goods.

During the Non-co-operation movement, differences arose between Gandhiji and Mrs. Besant. Hence she left the congress. But she continued to fight for our freedom till her death in 1933.(8)

WORK FOR WOMEN :

She worked with Mrs. Bradlaugh and fought successfully for the cause of the English girls, working in the match factories.(9) She condemned early marriage. She also disfavoured widow-hood in the Hindu-Society. She stood for the equality of women in India.

Mrs. Besant did much for the cause of female education. Theosophical society laid emphasis on female education for which girls schools were started at its different centres.(10) She tried to improve the lot of the women, fought for their rights and tried to free them from their disabilities. She pleaded for a radical change in social conditions, but never desired any modification of the Indian women's temperament which she held to be one of the most spiritual in the world.(11)

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THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

The theosophical society was founded by Westerners namely Madam H. P. Blavatsky and Col. A. S. Olcott in New York in the U.S.A. in 1875. They came to India and established, the main centre of the Theosophical society at Adyar, Madras in 1882(12). It was because of Mrs. Annie Besant, who joined the society in 1889 and settled in India in 1893 at the age of forty-six, that the Theosophical movement became a force in Indian history. The main aim of the Theosophical movement was the revival of the traditional religion and culture. Annie Besant dedicated herself throughout her life to this work.(13)

Annie Besant elected as President of Theosophical society after the death of Olcott in 1907, which she held until her death.(14) During her presidentship, the society grew considerably, with the addition of more than thirty six National societies. Mr. Besant was well acquainted with Indian thought and culture. She found a bridge between matter and mind and gradually turned a Hindu in her dress, food, company and social manners.

The theosophical society provided a common denominator for the various sects and fulfilled the urge of educated Hindus. However, to the average Indian, the philosophy of Theosophical movement seemed rather vague and deficient in positive programme and as such its impact was limited to a small segment of the Westernised class. Her presidentship spanned 26 years full of glorious devoted service to the Theosophical society and to mankind at large.(15)

HOME RULE LEAGUE

During first world war, Mrs. Annie Besant and Tilak decided to put new life in the national movement in the country. Tilak decided to use the term 'Home Rule' in place of Swaraj as the goal of his movement Tilak started Home Rule League on 28th April, 1916 with its headquarters at Poona. A similar Home Rule League was founded by Annie Besant on 15th September, 1916 with its headquarter at Adyar near Madras.(16)

Mrs. Annie Besant made it clear that home rule was the birth right of the people of India and they were not prepared to take it as a reward for their services for the British Empire and their loyalty to the British Crown.

The two Home leagues of Tilak and Besant worked in co-operation with each other. The Home Rule Movement reached its high watermark in 1917(17). Tilak confined his activities to the Bombay Presidency and the Central provinces and the remaining part of India was covered by Annie Besant. Annie Besant toured the country and created a lot of enthusiasm among the people for the national cause.

The Government decided to curb the activities of forefront leaders of the movement. It took action against Mrs. Besant and her two associates, B. P. Wadia and G. S. Arundale. Mrs. Besant was interned in June 1917. M. A. Jinnah joined the Home Rule League immediately after the internment of Annie Besant and her Associates. There was a lot of agitation for her release. When the atmosphere of the country was surcharged with enthusiasm, the secretary of state for India made in Aug. 1917 his declaration which promised responsible government to the people by stages. A joint meeting of the All India Congress Committee and the Council of the Muslim League was held on 28th July 1917. The work done by the Home Rule League was praised and the attitude of the Government was condemned. A strong and dignified representation was made to the viceroy of India and the Secretary of State for India. A demand was made that a substantial installment of Swaraj be given to India at once.

The agitation carried on by the Home Rule Leaguers had its effect on the British Government. An announcement was made on 20th August, 1917 that the goal of His Majesty's Government in India was to give the people of India a responsible Government within the British Empire by stages. The Secretary of State for India came to this country to study the situation on the spot and make his own recommendations. However, the followers of Annie Besant refused to accept the recommendations made in the Report.

After First World War in 1918, the Government of India founded itself in a stranger position to curb the activities of the Home Rule Leaguers.

In December 1918, the annual session of the congress was held at Delhi and a demand was made that India should be given the full status of a dominion. A resolution was passed calling upon the British Government to recognize India as "One of the progressive nations to whom the principle of self-determination should be applied.

Tilak organized the London committee of the Congress and a lot of public interest was created. However, it had practically no effect on the British Government as regards her attitude towards India. But gradually the Home Rule Movement died out. Mrs. Besant was freed in September 1917. Then gradually the Home Rule Movement died out(18).

The two Home Rule Leagues of Mrs. Besant and Tilak worked in harmonious co-operation and contributed to national awakening. They achieved great success. The Home Rule Movement attracted attention outside India also.(19)

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EDUCATION:

Mrs. Besant laid the foundation of the Central Hindu School in Benaras in 1898. It developed later on into a college where both the Hindu religion and Western scientific subjects were taught. It was served by many eminent persons in different capacities(20). It fostered the cause of higher education and merged with the Benaras Hindu University, on 1st Oct. 1917.(21)

CONCLUSION:

Mrs. Annie Besant Played a vital role in the nationalist movement of our country. She was responsible for a lot of national awakening in India. Her fiery speeches did a lot in infusing enthusiasm among the masses of the country. Although, she was a foreigner, her contribution to the cause of India's freedom was indeed very great.

She was responsible for the all-round development of India during her forty years of unceasing activity in every walk of life. She breathed her last on 20 Sep. 1933 at the age of 85 at Adyar, Madras Presidency in India.

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