

**ANNIE BESANT: A SUPPORTER OF HOME RULE FOR INDIA****Dr. Ritu Bharadwaj**

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1.0 Annie Besant (10<sup>th</sup> Oct 1847-20 September 1933) the debonaire figure, wielded her facile pen and used her multi-partite eloquence in touching every issue under the sky with equal ease and authenticity. Her noble and innovative brilliance in dealing meticulously educational, philosophical and political subjects shows her versatility and virile imagination. She made a number of experiments in synthesizing western science and technology, thus revealing her persistent and intelligent effort to reconcile the spiritual ideals with pragmatic values for the good of mankind. She possessed clarity of vision and depth of insight that encompassed her fervor to revive the higher values of Indian life in this age of materialism through a system of national education.

**1.1 EARLY LIFE**

Annie Besant was a prominent British Socialist theosophist, women's rights activist, writer and orator and supporter of Irish and Indian self-rule.

Annie Wood was born 1847 in London into a middle class family of Irish origin. Her father died when she was 5 years old, leaving the family almost penniless. As young woman she was able to travel widely in Europe. In 1867, at the age of 20, she married a clergyman Frank Besant. She had 2 children, but the marriage was a disaster over money matters and political differences. Women did not have the right to own property. Also Frank was a Tory and sided with landlords and farmers, whereas Annie fought for freedom of thought, women's rights, freedom, secularism, birth control, Fabian socialism and workers' rights. Divorce was unthinkable for Frank. So Annie was to remain Mrs. Besant for the rest of her life.

Besant was now exposed to new currents of thought. She began to question religious beliefs and also attacked the status of the Church of England. Besant was a brilliant speaker. For many years she was a friend of Charles Bradlaugh, an atheist and a republican. They published a book by the American birth-control campaigner Charles Knowlton and were household names in 1877. Bradlaugh got elected to Parliament in 1881. Meanwhile Besant built close contacts with Irish Home Rulers, Gradually Bradlaugh's parliamentary work alienated Besant. Besant was searching for a real political outlet, where her skills as a speaker, writer and organizer could do some real good.

Besant's decision in favour of socialism came through a close relationship with George Bernard Shaw, with whom she came in close contact in the early 1880s. Shaw sponsored her to join the Fabian society. Unemployment was a great issue at the time. She was arrested for making a speech in their favour in the Trafalgar Square. Another activity was her involvement in the London match girls' strike in 1888, in which she supported the cause of young women for better pay and conditions employed in the match industry. She was also involved in the London Dock Strike (1889).

**1.2 BESANT'S COMING TO INDIA AND HER WORK IN INDIA**

Annie Besant came to India in 1893 and since then she made India her home. She was elected President of the Theosophical Society in 1907. The main aims of the Theosophical Society were:

1. To establish a centre for universal brotherhood by eliminating on the basis of caste, sub-caste, colour or creed.

2. To reveal the secrets of nature and enhance the hidden power of man.
3. God is one and the soul is only a part of it.

Besant set up a new school for boys, the Central Hindu College, which was formed on underlying theosophical principles. A number of other schools in different parts of the country were also opened.

Annie Besant much before she arrived in India had already won public recognition as a great leader in the west and other parts of the world by her outstanding oratorical gifts her numerous writings on religious, philosophical and social work. Her strenuous, active and tireless work in several fields for human freedom and sympathy for low and down trodden was well-known. The fact that her very first public lecture dealt with the political status of women focussed that she stood for equality of rights and duties for all men and women. Her services for India had already begun when she published a book on England, India and Afghanistan in 1878. From that period the first twenty years of her life in India between 1893 and 1913, she did relentless work in various fields like education, religion and society.

### 1.3 HOME RULE: THE CONCEPT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

At the call of liberty and freedom, she ranged herself alongside the people of India in their struggle for freedom, which she directed with her trust, ability and capacity to lead the Indian society from the beginning of her career. Besant had been a home ruler, whether in the case of Ireland or South-Africa or India. She had been a passionate opponent of injustice to weaker nations. She was always in opposition to the Government of the day-against England's aggressive and oppressive policy in Ireland, in the Transvaal, in Afghanistan, in Burma and in India. She lifted her voice trying to touch the consciousness of the English people.

Besant's mighty political work coincided with the commencement of the First World War. She threw the weight of her opinion on the side of the Allies. 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 contributed two great concepts: Home Rule for India as a member of the British commonwealth of Nations and secondly, the principle of self-determination for India.

Besant's concept of Home Rule can be gleaned from the extracts given below:

- i. *A united India "Dr. Besant's political in was a united India attaining freedom functioning on a level of equality with all other nation of the earth and contributing its share to the progress of the world"*
- ii. ***Freedom with equality and friendly link with Britain***  
Claim India's place among the nations.... The end will be a great triumph, take care it is not stained by excess. Liberty for India but within the British Federation was the goal for which I was to work ...Dominion status gives independence within India with an equal and friendly by link with Britain through the crown.<sup>1</sup>
- iii. ***India to be a sovereign nation under the imperial crown.*** India does not want to break the link with Britain. She wants to remain part of the empire but an equal part, a self-governing community, standing on a level with the self-governing dominions. She wants to be free in India as the Englishman is free in England. To make and unmake ministries at their will, to carry arms, to have her own army, her own navy her own volunteers. To levy her own taxes, to make her own budgets, to inculcate her own people, to irrigate her own lands, to mine her own ores, to mint her own coin, to be a sovereign nation within her own borders, acknowledging the paramount power of the imperial crown, and sending her soul to the imperial council.<sup>3</sup>
- iv. ***Social equality for Indians-*** Indians who have been taught the value of liberty, that taxation without representation in robbery that government rests on the will of the people and Indians demand to be treated as equals and not as a subject race. Besant questioned the British empire on social difficulties that the exclusion of Indians from clubs, the insults often offered to them if they travel first class on railway, the refusal to admit them to railways rest rooms at night, that social equality will only come with political equality.<sup>4</sup>
- v. **The governance-** "India to be governed by the own men, freely elected by herself, to make and break ministers at her will, carry erms to have her own army, her own navy, to levy her own taxes,

to make her own budget, to educate her own people, to irrigate her own land... to be sovereign nation within her own borders, owning the paramount power of the imperial crown and sending her sons to the imperial council.”<sup>5</sup>

vi. **Why India should demand Home Rule?**

“India demands Home Rule for two reasons. First, freedom is the birthright of every nation. Secondly, her most important interests are now made subservient to the interests of the British Empire without her consent, and her resources are not utilized for the greatest needs. It is enough only to mention the money is spent on her army, not for local defence, but for Imperial purposes, as compared with the money spent on primary education.”<sup>6</sup>

**1.4 EFFORTS MADE BY ANNIE BESANT TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL OF HOME RULE**

Annie Besant was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1914. She set the goal of Home Rule and started working for it. She started a weekly newspaper, *The Common Weal* in January 1914. In July, she purchased the *Madras Standard* and renamed it as *New India*. She roused public opinion to support self-rule. Her method was intensive and well-organized constitutional agitation. On 27<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1915, it was decided to establish Home Rule League to carry out propaganda to fight for self-Government in India. Her aim was to unify both the wings of the Congress moderates and extremists and Hindus and Muslims. In Lucknow session, there was a record gathering of leaders including Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, Sarojni Naidu Surendra Nath Banarjee, G.S. Arundale and Annie Besant.

*New India* and *The Common Weal* rendered tremendous service for her intensive campaign for home-rule. In 1917 there was a quickening of national consciousness. It was followed by police repression and repression on student participation in politics. The authorities imposed severe repressive measures against the Home Rule Movement and to stop Besant’s journalistic campaign. But because of the mass support, the government failed to contain the movement. Besant was arrested, but because of public protests released later.

**1.5 BESANT AND GANDHIJI-DIVERGENCE OF VIEWS ON NON-CO-OPERATION-**

By 1918 Annie Besant was almost side lined in the political scene in India, because of her insistence on the need to obey the law. She fought for Home Rule, but she worked against non-cooperation which she felt was revolutionary in principle. Gandhiji proposed to ‘Paralyze’ the government, to render it powerless, unable to govern. It stirs up hatred between government and people and sets the people against the government. It also strikes at the foundation of society which is based on co-operation. It means reversion to anarchy, a violent breaking of all the initial ties which bind man together. It will inevitably lead to rioting and bloodshed.

Besant’s method to attain freedom for India was by way of intense and well-organized constitutional agitation. Her differences with Gandhi ji broke out with his new policy of using the technique of civil disobedience by the people to force the British government to concede to India’s demand for Independence.

Besant expressed unqualified admiration for Gandhiji’s lofty ideals, insistence on austerity and personal abnegation and strict adherence to truth and non-violence in all political activities. But while she believed in adopting passive resistance, to have evil laws changed, she refused on principle, to agree to the breaking of any general law to bring pressure on the authorities.

Besant firmly believed that any movement for mass action would release forces degenerating into violence, and would in the long run be detrimental to India’s national life. She strongly supported the constitutional method for social reforms. Hence she was totally opposed to using civil disobedience which she forecast, would lead to violent disturbances even bloodshed, as the masses would go out of control. When Indian political struggle was at the cross roads, the Indian people over-whelming voted to follow Mahatma Gandhi and support the mass civil disobedience programme to achieve the goal of freedom. Besant lost her political hold rapidly. After Amritsar session of Indian National Congress in 1919, she broke from the Congress finally, though she attended two more Congress sessions in 1924 and 1928. Before opting out completely from the political scene, she made one last effort to force the British

government accept the demand for Dominion Status for India, but failed to get any substantial support. She was bitterly disappointed. She gradually faded from Indian political scene. However, it may be said to her credit that the Home Rule bill was later used as a model for Indian independence from Great Britain.

Despite all political differences between Besant and Gandhi, the later had remarked:

“Cultivate the qualities of Dr. Besant namely firmness, simplicity, self-control etc. She is one of the greatest orators of the world, because she speaks what she believes and acts according to what she speaks. She has the courage of her convictions and always puts her word into action... Imitate her unflinching determination and simplicity of life... obtain the same strength and indomitable will that she possesses which alone will bring Swaraj. India is not fit for Swaraj without these qualities. Remove India's .... And them alone will we achieve our goal. Religion is interwoven in Dr. Besant's life and she has built a bridge between politics and religion. Swaraj without religion is of no use. It is Dr. Besant who has awakened India from her deep slumber and I pray that she may live long to witness a free India.”

## REFERENCES

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