

PEER- REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

***Aarhat Multidisciplinary
International Education Research
Journal (AMIERJ)
ISSN 2278-5655***

Impact Factor :0.948

Bi-Monthly

VOL - II

ISSUES - V

[2013-14]



**C h i e f -
E d i t o r :**

**U b a l e
A m o l
B a b a n**

[Editorial/Head Office: 108, Gokuldharm Society, Dr.Ambedkar chowk, Near TV Towar,Badlapur, MS

**ANNIE BESANT AND ARYAVARTA --- INVOKING THE ANCIENT INDIAN
WISDOM**

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After 1893, and until her death, Annie Besant choose to direct her superabundant energy towards India. She almost ruled the country as a high priestess over a sect whose members were meticulously engaged in studying ancient Indian scriptures. Her objective was to seize the fulcrum of contemporary power and to use it to bring about an irreversible shift in India's political direction. Her enterprise seemed to be planned. Firstly, she considered it necessary to revive the faith of the people in the old religion. Her next step was to combine traditional learning with the best of Western education and then finally to enter politics.¹ Her aim was rather visionary. She wanted to bring about a universal and theocratic state where men lived fostered with the feeling of brotherhood and humanism. As Adyar was the headquarter of the Colonel Olcott's Theosophy, she choose Benaras, the holy Kashi which was the Hindu Rome as the headquarter of an independent Indian section of Theosophy.

It was in the forbidding city of Benaras, among people of an alien race that Annie Besant sought to wield authority.² Besides the common people who flocked to the sacred river, Ganges, Benaras attracted acolytes from all over India to its monasteries, whose priests were the guardians of Brahmanism. According to E.B.Havell, the priests and pundits of Benaras regarded as worthless, all knowledge not contained in the Hindu sacred writings. Even propagandists like Swami Vivekanand were frowned upon.³ Havell was astonished at the progress Beasant managed to make in the city. Upon her arrival, Beasant set herself to learn Sanskrit, and as early as 1895 published an English translation of the most beautiful of all the ancient texts, the BhagavadGita.⁴ This was not the first translation of this ancient text but her introduction to the

text distinguished it from the others. According to her, the central lesson of the Gita was that spiritual man need not be a recluse : ‘ that union with the divine life may be achieved and in the midst of wordly affairs.’ In other words Annie Besant was convinced that the ultimate teaching of the Gita embraced a sense of social responsibility which she was determined to arouse among Indians.

Her next publishing venture was a textbook to be used as the basis for religious instruction at the Central Hindu College for Boys she founded in Benaras.⁵ She prepared the Sanatama Dharma (Virtuous Conduct), which was scrutinized by a board of trustees before it was adopted. This new boy’s institution was to be a Hindu monastery and English public school combined. The Boys would emerge as pious Aryan gentlemen able to hold their own with Western citizens. They would be endowed with ancient Aryan virtues which according to Besant were : reverence, self reliance, freedom, moderation, calmness, gentleness, justice and courtesy.⁶ The school was divided into houses; order was maintained by prefects. The first one and half hour each day was given to prayer, meditation, and questions on the sacred book. Besant herself took classes in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. The boys were constantly reminded that they had reached the third stage of a Brahmin’s life, that of Brahmacharya, the time of celibacy. And they were admonished to be pure in thought, word and deed. Science lessons were based on practical experiment, using apparatus carefully constructed by the first Principal, Dr Richardson.⁷ Beginning in 1895, it took Besant only three years to raise money for the Central Hindu College, during which time she travelled thousands of miles; sleeping at dak bungalows, or camping at rail junctions. Everywhere she went asking for money, she urged local inhabitants to start religious instruction in their own schools, whatever their faith. One of her most enthusiastic helpers was Pandit Motilal Nehru, father of Jawaharlal. From 1899 until 1902, the future Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was tutored by a Theosophist, F.T. Brooks, whom Annie Besant recommended at Motilal’s request.⁸ The Central Hindu College grew up to house around a thousand boys --- ‘ the natural leaders of young Hinduism’ as Annie liked to call them. It flourished inspite of her long absence due to the judicious administration of its Secretary, Babu Bhagavan Das, whom Annie had persuaded to abandon a promising career in government service as a magistrate in order to assist her.⁹ The outlook for the Central Hindu College was transformed when the Lieutenant—Governor of the United Provinces denounced Besant’s initiative as a disloyal act. Sir Anthony Macdonald complained that she was using education as a

cloak for politics.¹⁰ Enraged by the remark, the Maharaja of Kashmir bestowed a large sum of money on the college. The Maharaja of Benaras donated one of his spare palaces to be a permanent home for the school. Macdonald's warning received the warm approval of the Secretary of State for India, Lord George Hamilton.

Though Annie Besant behaved like a Hindu, she never lost sight of the fact that her life was dedicated to being an intermediary between the Masters and the Theosophists who were at a lower stage of progress than herself. She told a friend, ' people know I am a disciple and my words and actions give them evidence I am.'¹¹ The doctrine of Theosophy that she practiced believed in the ability to express the immaterial in scientific terms. Besant's inclination was in any case, for an intellectual explanation rather than a 'phenomena'. She was influenced by Charles Webster Leadbeater, a teacher versed in occult matters.¹² A curate unhappy with his lot, Leadbeater took refuge in Theosophy when he abandoned the church of England. In 1884, Madam Blavatsky took him out to Adyar. The leadership was pleased, the members were flattered by the scale and singularity of the doctrinal edifice he gradually unveiled. Besant and Leadbeater became collaborators and fellow explorers of an unknown country in search of knowledge. They combined their special interest in a book called Occult Chemistry, which presented the results they had obtained by using clairvoyance to examine elements and atoms.¹³ However, with time Annie Besant realized that Leadbeater's occult vision was so precise and confident that it left nothing to individual surmise and his interpretation hardened into dogma. This was something Theosophy had opposed and which was in contrast to her free thinking self. Colonel Olcott, the President of the Theosophy in London was disturbed by the motives of Leadbeater as he was getting adverse reports from India.¹⁴ Leadbeater was removed from the theosophy society. Shortly thereafter, Olcott died. Annie had been liberated by Olcott's death from her undertaking not to engage in politics at a moment when the British had good cause for alarm. Long before 1907, Besant began to reshape Theosophy with the help, rather than under anyone's influence. As in every millennium sect, the expectations of her followers had to be kept alive. Many faiths including Christianity and Hinduism, are familiar with the concept of the avtar, the teacher who brings reward for the faithful, and hope for the rest: Blavatsky herself endorsed it. While Olcott was still alive Besant did no more in public than lecture on the subject. As soon as she became President of the Theosophical Society, Besant took steps to consolidate the doctrines that shaped the Theosophical movement. Bhagawan Das, one of the close

associates of Besant observed that of the two qualities in Besant's remarkable nature, higher and lower --- altruism and egotism --- the former, the wish to serve the mankind, had prevailed from 1894, when he first knew her, to 1907. After she moved to Adyar and became President, she fell victim to her wish to be regarded as a Saviour.¹⁵

During the past decade, there had been a revolution in the attitude of Indians towards their rulers. Even before Olcott died, she joined with Gokhale, Naoroji and other leaders of the Moderates to oppose Curzon government's introduction of stricter controls over educational establishments. Annie Besant described the arrogance of Lord Curzon as the very best encouragement to nationalist aspirations. In April 1908 she had to be called to account by the Commissioner of Benaras for articles in praise of Lala Lajpat Rai which appeared in the Central Hindu College Magazine, and for inviting him to lecture to the boys. Annie Besant and Lala Lajpat Rai shared the same aspiration. As Besant put it in her own words, " a self governing Indian nation within the British Empire."¹⁶ This incident illustrates the peculiar difficulty the Government of India faced in dealing with a maverick like Besant. Lord Minto the successor of Curzon took advice from Francis Younghusband, who was both a mystic with profound knowledge of Eastern faiths, and a high official of the Raj. He told Minto that she was sincere but dangerous. By her praise of their ancient knowledge she was encouraging Hindus to believe themselves superior to Europeans, which in the circumstances was an attitude that might endanger peace. He suggested the Viceroy to commit himself to nothing more than kind words of sympathy with her ' very real and genuine desire to improve the lot of Indians'.¹⁷

Annie could not be diverted by platitudes. In February 1910 she mounted an attack upon the British for racial prejudice. Her 'Appeal', which was circulated with the Central Hindu College Magazine, was provoked by an incident which occurred on a train when a venerable Theosophist was turned out of a first class carriage by an Englishman. The Appeal called on Minto to check the hatred that was dividing community from community as a result of thoughtless acts. 'Speak strongly as only you can do to these lower English who are destroying your work and undermining the British Empire. Bid your officials to guard your Indian children and shield them from Outrage and from wrong.'The tremendous uproar that greeted this was prolonged when Besant publicly expressed her fear, on the one hand, that the Lieutenant Governor would deport her, on the other, that her life was in danger from irate Anglo Indians. G.K.Gokhale was moved to intervene. 'The hearts of millions and millions of Indians have been

with you', Gokhale told her; 'the insults and vexations you have had to endure will be repaid a hundredfold by the gratitude of the Indians for the way you have spoken out.'¹⁸ Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras observed that Besant was a most capable organizer, thoroughly versed in all methods of Western political agitation, and a forceful speaker. In the years leading up to the first world war, events in Ireland, her home had a marked effect on Annie Besant's attitude to India. While progress was being made in England towards a parliamentary settlement of the Irish problem, she was encouraged to believe that India's turn would shortly come. As far as India was concerned, inspite of its vastness, the number of people engaged in politics was so small she was known to virtually all of them and her influence was disproportionately great. Before she came upon the scene, one of her Indian colleagues remarked, the history of politics was of debating societies in whose chambers small groups of people deliberated over resolutions. 'To none of us had come the vision of going to the villages, of speaking to the people at large, of making them realize what they could do, and what it was their duty to do.'¹⁹ Besant thus prepared the way for Mahatma Gandhi and his mass agitation.

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