

ENTRY OF ANNIE BESANT IN TO INDIAN POLITICS - A STUDY

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The political ideology of Mrs. Besant was aimed at India's religious, economic, social and national revival of the factors that shaped her political ideas, the most important were Indian spirituality and her faith in the greatness of Indian thought. Her Theosophical background prompted her to establish a world empire based on the idea of universal brotherhood, for which the relationship of India and England was inevitable. She wanted to strengthen the relationship between India and

England by following the ideas of equality and brotherhood. Her main aim was to lift up the whole world by establishing a Commonwealth of Nations and a World Empire. Unlike the moderates, she believed in the greatness of Indian spiritualism and tried to revive Indian ideals. Unlike the extremists, she believed in the constitutional ideologies taught by the moderates and never advocated violence. A believer in radical changes, she was influenced by the writings of liberalism and democracy. She brought passion, eagerness, vigour and discipline in politics and favoured

the introduction of changes or reforms at the earliest. No wonder, she was not at all satisfied with the slow activities of the Congress leaders. Her main idea was to establish a Commonwealth of Nations.

Induction into Politics:

In Mrs. Besant's pamphlet, *England, India and Afghanistan*, written in 1876, she demanded self-government for Indians by slow stages. She made her first contact with the Congress in 1894, at the Madras session. The Congress leaders invited her to deliver two lectures, one on "The Place of Politics in the Life of a Nation" and the other on "Temperance."¹ In 1902, in London, she said to the people of England that the rule of the British was mainly responsible for the miserable conditions in India. She asked the British Government whether they had a right to rule 30,00,00,000 of people in name and not understand the alphabet of the Indian question very largely, in the Imperial Parliament.² She criticized the British Government, for ruling India for the profit of her conquerors, and also for treating Indians as the conquered race. She attributed the famines to the financial drain of the 'Home Charges' and the huge bureaucracy, and partly to the destruction of the manufactured goods to India for the profit of Lancashire.³

In 1903, she asked the British Government to rule India, not on western lines but on the basis of Indian feelings, but on Indian traditions, Indian thoughts and Indian ideas. She said that she dreamt of the time when India, England, Australia and Canada would all join hands in the making of a common Empire, when India's children would bring their priceless treasures to the enriching of that Empire.⁴ In 1905, she made public her opinion on politics. In 1909, when the Congress was divided into two, she called it the saddest event in the history of the Congress.

She considered the Village Councils the necessary units of Local Self-Government and wanted their revival. She was greatly influenced by the Panchayat system of the ancient times and attributed its collapse to the British rule, first by the East India Company and later by the British Government. By destroying the native industries, she believed, the English East India Company reduced India to poverty and the Crown continued this process subsequently.

She felt the need to tighten the ties between India and England for the good of both the countries. She always stood for the preservation of the link between the two, because, in her opinion, such relation would serve to preserve peace between Asia and Europe. It would stand as a

barrier against the breaking out of war between the two continents. By war, she meant a conflict of coloured and white humanity, which would destroy Asiatic and European civilizations. In her opinion, Home Rule was necessary for each constituent nation of the Commonwealth, because every nation had its own problems, which its own natives were to solve. So she requested the Englishmen to strengthen ties with India. In 1912, she started active propaganda work for uplifting the Indians, and gave a series of lectures that marked the beginning of an earnest and concerted movement for the same.⁵ She took an active interest in Indian politics from that year onwards and began to participate in the Congress meetings held in Madras. Through her writings she wanted to make Indians fully aware of the evils of the British rule. In order to achieve this aim, firstly she founded a number of organizations and groups throughout India, aimed to support the Congress. Secondly, she conducted propaganda work through her newspapers, pamphlets and lectures and also organized propaganda funds. Thirdly, she started a number of national schools and colleges in different parts of India. To give training to the Indians in the art of politics, she even established a mock parliament. Finally, on behalf of the Indians, she sent a number of representations and deputations to England. She also protested against the misrule of the British.

Her activities in India during 1893-1913 were largely confined to the field of Theosophy, education, and social reform. Soon, she realized the fact that real improvement could be achieved only by raising the political status of India. She studied in depth the administrative system of ancient India, the history of the Mauryas, Guptas, Mughals, Rajputs, Sikhs and the Mrathas, and the tyrannies and the wrongs of the British Government. She studied the black story of Clive and Hastings, and the sad Viceroyalty of Lord Curzon.⁶ All these exercises helped her to evaluate the political condition of India at the time of her advent in Indian politics.

In 1913 she ventured into active politics, as the political conditions of that period compelled her to do so. She said: "It is possible that I should have never jumped into political work, had not increasing repression by the authority, narrowing of liberty, the ill-treatment of L students, and the danger of revolution forced me into the field." She plunged into the political struggle, because she found that the unbearable force of repressive legislation had hampered all progressive action.⁸

In one of her articles in New India she said: "Liberty was being strangled to death, and I, one of her old soldiers, could not stand aside. I

joined the political campaign. Not to lead, but to take risks."⁹ These lines indicate the grounds for her joining the Congress. In 1913, she even declared that freedom was the price of India's loyalty. She decided to popularize the idea of Self-Government. To this end, she delivered a series of lectures in Madras, the most important among them being: 'Foreign Travel', 'Child-marriage and its Results': 'Our duty to the Depressed Gases'; Indian Industries as related to self-Government'; Mass Education'; The Education of Indian Girls'; and 'The passing of the Caste System.'¹⁰ Later, all these lectures that greatly influenced the Indian were wrapped together under the title, Wake up India. In July 1913, Mrs.Besant published a collection of her lectures, which marked her first step towards participation in Indian politics.

From 1913, she began to champion the cause of building up India into "a mighty self-governing community."¹¹ She realized that only with the help of a political movement could she do something for India. With this aim in mind, she requested the Congress to sponsor a movement. She pursued Sir Feroze Shah Mehta, in a letter, asking him to take the direction of a national movement. As Mehta refused to accept her proposal, she wrote to Dadabhai Naoroji, who too declined to cooperate. Disappointed, Mrs.Besant decided to start her movement out of the Congress fold. Her entry into Indian politics was not liked by many of her

friends in the Theosophical Society. To such friends, she said that the question of Home Rule for India was no question of party politics, but one of principle, of the liberation of a people from despotic rule.

Historians have attributed various reasons for the entry of Mrs. Besant into Indian politics. After coming to India, she had to face a number of obstacles to the smooth conduct of her educational and social activities. Some attribute this to the British Government's refusal to grant a charter conferring University status upon the Central Hindu College, and others to the Krishnamurti incident, after which, they say, the Government turned against her and refused to help her. As such, she plunged into politics in order to make her work possible. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar views that she entered Indian politics only because of her desire for the elevation of mankind. Similarly, Mrs. William, her biographer, has pointed out that she entered politics only because of her desire to assume the leadership of the Nationalist Movement. Another aim was the fostering of Indo-British friendship. In 1914, she moved from purely educational and socio-religious activity into the field of politics. She delivered a political lecture in January 1914 at Madurai and subsequently joined the Congress. As a delegate of the Congress Session, she demanded political equality with the other citizens of the Empire.¹²

She brought passion, enthusiasm and discipline into politics and inspired the Congress with new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organization and a new outlook into the field of the Congress. Her ideas brought about a sea change in the political field and India witnessed political awakening of a new type under her direction. This enabled India to carve out a place in the political map of the world.¹³ In order to convert the Congress into a united front, Mrs. Besant advocated two major ideas in the Congress, viz., an agitation aimed at moving the British to grant Home Rule, and re-entry of the Extremists into the national body.¹⁴

She felt the presence of a group of people in Madras who wanted to drive her out of public life. In order to weaken them and to gain public support to her activities, she decided to launch in January 1914, the weekly newspaper, *The Commonwealth*. It aimed to champion the cause of freedom of thought and action, and to put great importance on human dignity, equality and social fairness.¹⁵

END NOTES

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4. Verinder Grover and Ranjana Arora (eds.), *Great Woman of Modern India - Annie Besant*, New Delhi, 1967, p. 331.
5. ManMohan Kaur, *Women in India's freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, 1992, p. 117.
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7. *Ibid*, 4 Apr. 1917, p. 47.
8. Verinder Grover and Ranjana Arora (eds.), *Op. Cit*, p.336. 9
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12. Josephine Ransom, *Op. Cit*, p.414.
13. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of Indian National Congress (1885-1935)*, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1969, p.1 19.
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