

**ANNIE BESANTS IDEALS TOWARDS NATIONAL
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The Government's circular about students and politics roused Annie Besant to initiate practical steps brought about the scheme of National Education to the fore. The greatest feature of her scheme of education was that it should be independent of governmental control, and, in her opinion, it was only possible when it was also not dependent on governmental assistance.

In Besant's opinion National Education must live in an atmosphere of proud and glowing patriotism. She defined National Education as follows:

It must be controlled by Indians, shaped by Indians, carried on by Indians. It must hold up Indian ideals of devotion, wisdom and morality, and must be permeated by the Indian religious spirit rather than fed on the letter of the creeds.¹

It must also meet the National temperament at every point, and develop the National character.

Her ideas of National Education, which remained for a long time as an ideal, gained the attention of many Indian leaders like Sir Rash Behari Bose, Gandhi, Arobindo Ghose, Srijut Moti Lai Ghose (editor, Amrita Bezar Patrika), Motilal Nehru, etc. Arobindo Ghose considered National Education next to Self-Government. Srijut Moti Lai Ghose considered that "we cannot expect to attain Home Rule until our educational system is put under our own control"² Motilal Nehru believed that the National Education would make Indians capable of worthily discharging their coming national responsibilities.

To Honourable B.V. Narasimhaier, National Education looked like a cloud not bigger than a man's hand, that would, however, spread and cover the entire length and breadth of the country in a very short time, bestowing blessings.³ Tilak considered National Education a branch or a means to the attainment of self-government. In an article, Mrs. Besant wrote:

As the Government Educational Service becomes more and more rigid and the deadening official pressure which crushes out patriotism and the sense of pride in the country becomes heavier, those who work for India's freedom within the Empire are faced by a grim alternative.... It is necessary to do something to save these unfortunate youths from

becoming either slaves or rebels.⁴

Soon, the elaborate scheme of National Education began to spread, and she began to collect funds for starting a National College in Madras. Mrs. Besant considered the national education movement not a political device to arrest the functioning of the British government. It was a social measure to instill in the youth the spirit of the motherland and was a requirement to make the Indians fit for Home Rule.

After the issue of the Government Order, Mrs. Besant sent a letter to a number of well-known people, seeking their help for the formation of the Board of National Education, to frame the curriculum and to handle the tasks of appointment of examiners, conduct of examinations and issue of diplomas. The Board of National Education was to establish universities, colleges and schools under national control and to start institutions of research, and training colleges in commerce, medicine, industry, etc. Drill, physical exercises, games, fencing, Indian swordplay and the sciences of self-defence were to form part of the curriculum. Boy Scouts cadets must be trained. In the national scheme, she paid special attention to the education of girls, whom she wanted to convert into noble women of the Indian type, devoted wives and wise mothers. In her opinion, her Colleges, though independent of Government, must excel

Government Colleges in efficiency.⁵ Her letter was sent to 74 persons. Out of them 41 readily accepted her idea. One declined and another one promised to help and support her, but had not decided to join the Board.

Her concept of National Education deepened the youth's imagination, sharpened their outlook and increased their desire to serve the country. She formed the national educational movement not as a political tool to arrest the working of the Government, but as a social measure. The first National University was established at Madanapalli, with Sir Rabindranath Tagore as the Chancellor. Sir Subramanya Iyer acted as the Pro-Chancellor; Justice Sadasiva Ayyar was appointed Acting Vice-Chancellor, and G.S. Arundale the Registrar. Madanapalli became the centre for arts and agriculture, Bengal for technology, Bombay for commerce, and Benares for the training of women teachers.

The Theosophical Fraternity in Education founded at Adyar in 1917, with Arundale as its President and Mrs. Besant as the Patron, was to give inspiration in the educational field. In December 1921 the Hindu University conferred on Mrs. Besant the Degree of Doctor of Letters, in grateful recognition of her "invaluable co-operation in establishing the University."⁶ In 1922, Dr. H.H. Cousins and others started a new venture called the Brahmavidyasharma. In 1925, the World University

Association was inaugurated with Dr. J. Emile Marcault as its Director. The work started by Mrs. Besant continued even after her death in 1933. In 1934, the Besant Memorial High School was founded at Adyar in remembrance of her great services to education.

The educational movements during the Home Rule days played a very important role in the history of Indian freedom movement. The leaders of this movement never accepted the boycott of western educational institutions. Mrs. Besant never considered educational movements a political tool to suspend the work of the British Government. At the same time, she used these movements to infuse the feeling of nationalism and freedom in the minds of the Indian youth. In her opinion, such movements were essential for making the students fit for Home Rule.

In early 1917, she carried out a vigorous campaign for Self-Government and toured throughout the country, conducting many meetings. She and her lieutenant, Arundale, temporarily shifted their personal activities to Northern India on 1 January 1917. Apart from writing many articles she issued pamphlets both in English and in the local languages. In these pamphlets, she criticized the Government for its administration, foreign policy in regard to home charges, policy of

recruitment, destruction of industries, education, and the land revenue policy. She wrote, column after column in her papers, about the Indian demand for Home Rule.

Mrs. Besant's political knowledge was so great that after hearing her lecture, Sir Seshadri Ayyar called her 'a Sharada, a Gargi and a Maitreyi.'⁷ Arundale, in his article titled Magnaest Veritas, declared his firm intention to oppose the resistance to the executive action threatened against Home Rulers. In one of Besant's articles, she asked her followers to form a Prayer Union and direct their prayers to the abolition of the Press Act and the modification of the Defence of India Act, She even prepared a prayer entitled 'God helps those who help themselves', and asked her followers to add the same to their daily prayers. The daily prayer ran as follows:

Most High God, who rulest the kingdoms of men, we pray
Thee - as our Rulers do not heed our protests - that thou wilt so
change their hearts that they may refrain from confiscations and
internments, that they may punish none without open trial,
conviction, and sentence, and that they repeal the Press Act, and
restrict the Defence of India Act to the punishment of treason and
rioting, so that these may no longer be turned to the injury of loyal
subjects of Thy servant, the King-Emperor. ⁸

She desired that this prayer should be translated into all the vernaculars and circulated everywhere. It formed part of every puja and worship. She asked her followers to revive the old Swadeshi vow if her paper was confiscated and she was interned. In her opinion, "Prayer and Swadeshi are both absolutely legal, and they are also peaceable means of protesting against the harsh measures of the Government."⁹ Her Swadeshi vow ran as follows :

Whereas the Press Act and the Defence of India Act are being used to cripple the liberty of the Indian Press, and to deprive persons of their liberty against whom no evidence exists of disloyalty or of intent to resort to violence; and Whereas it is necessary to draw the attention of the British public to the serious discontent arising from the widespread and illegitimate use of these measures, the legality of which is, moreover doubtful, as being beyond the power of the Supreme Government of India to enact; and Whereas the Supreme and Local Governments are utterly indifferent to Indian opinion, as proclaimed in hundreds of meetings and articles in Indian papers, it is therefore necessary to take such peaceable but effective action as is open to us.

It is hereby resolved that:

Invoking the blessing of Almighty God, and making appeal to His Justice, for the purpose of winning for ourselves and for unborn

generations the elementary rights of freedom of person and security of property until deprived of them by judicial sentence after open trial, we make the solemn vow to purchase home-made goods in preference to foreign ones even at a sacrifice. And may Almighty God give us strength of will to carry out this our solemn vow until these rights be restored to the Indian Nation.¹⁰

She emphasized in her article 'To My Brothers and Sisters', that "only by winning Home Rule can India secure her material prosperity, only thus can she save what is left of her trade, her industries and her agriculture, improve them and reap the rights of her own labour."¹¹ She added, "I am old, but I believe that I shall see India win Home Rule before I die. If I have helped even so little to the realization of that glorious hope, I am more than satisfied."¹² In the same article she made it clear that she worked vigorously for Home Rule only to save India from becoming a nation of coolies. She clarified that she would happily suffer in her campaign of achieving Self-Government, which alone would secure prosperity to India. She continued her work without any fear.

The above account of Mrs. Besant's work reveals that she did a lot to infuse the spirit of nationalism, patriotism and freedom in the minds of the youth. It was she who made the Indian youth patriotic. She became so popular among the students that they gathered in large numbers at her

meetings.

The British bureaucracy which was till then engaged in suppressing terrorist and extremist movements, was forced to gear up to face a situation created by a 'constitutional and law-abiding agitation'. Platforms, libraries, street processions turned to be the venues from where the constitutional means of agitation began to be transmitted to the people by means of newspapers, literature, pamphlets and display of placards and flags. The intermittent educative propaganda demanding Home Rule caused the tradition of the Indian National Congress in meeting periodically to pass resolutions, to pass into oblivion. The meetings at various levels made the message of Home Rule reach every nook and corner of India rapidly and the British bureaucracy was caught unawares in the waves of a high-level political current.

END NOTES

1. G.S.Arundale, *National Education, A Symposium, Message and opinions of some leading Indians*, Madras, 1918, p. 18, TNA.
2. SAI7/.,p. 8.
3. *Ibid*, p. 13.
4. '*New India*', 5 Jun. Madras, 1917, p. 167.
5. *Ibid.*, 6 Jun. Madras, 1917,p.169.
6. Josephine Ransom, *Op.Cit*, p. 446.

7. *'Sampad Abhyudaya'*, 28 May Madras, 1916, p.23.
8. *'Commonweal'*, 24 Nov. Madras, 1916, p.33.
9. *Ibid.*, p35.
10. *Ibid.*, p.38.
11. *'New India'*, 15 Jun. Madras, 1917,p.197.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 198.