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ROLE OF ANNIE BESANT IN THE HOME RULE

MOVEMENT 1914 - 1918

ANITHA.N

Assistant Professor of History
V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women
Virudhunagar



E-mail: anithathambidurai@gmail.com

Keep the Flag of Freedom Flying
To your latest Breath:
If you cannot Win Her living
Conquer Her by death^[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the Annie Besant's public career, political activities and formation of Home Rule League in the National movement. This period is of great significance in the history of the national struggle for it was for the first time that a woman, Annie Besant, led the national movement. Her writings and speeches during this period mainly dealt with arguments against the British rule i.e, the poverty of India, the drain (Home charges), employment of Indians in the public services, executive bias in the administration of justice, army commissions and railway policy.

ANNIE BESANT'S

This paper deals with the Annie Besant's public career, political activities and formation of Home Rule League in the National movement. This period is of great significance in the history of the national struggle for it was for the first

time that a woman, Annie Besant, led the national movement and " she wrenched Indian politics out of its automatic and placid theorizing, made it a living and vital issue before the country and the whole empire....." ^[2]

These years were equally important on account of the First World War, a crisis which threatened the integrity and stability of the British Empire. The Indian people helped the British war efforts with men, money and material and thus saved the English from disaster. The political parties, for once, decided unanimously to suspend political activities to help the British in their perilous hour.

The period also witnessed the birth of few major national events, i.e, reunion of the moderates and the extremists in the Indian national congress in 1916, an alliance between the Muslim league and the congress, the outcome, of which was the congress-league scheme (Lucknow pact, 1916), and above all the inauguration of the Home.

Rule League and the Home Rule Agitation which shook the nation from its deep slumber and increased the tempo of national life.

These years are of far greater importance in the history of the women's movement. It was due to the lead given by Annie Besant that an organized movement of the emancipation of women and to put forward the demand for political rights for women came to be established. Her leadership gave strength, encouragement and inspired the women of the land to participate in the national life of the country and to join the national movement

in increased numbers. C.M. Reddi observed, "Dr. A. Besant prepared the ground for the Gandhian freedom movement in which women have played a prominent part."^[3]

PUBLIC CAREER

Mrs. Besant came under the influence of Charles Bradlaugh in 1847 and joined his national reformer. In 1881, she became its co-editor which Bradlaugh, Mrs. Besant made her first speech at the cooperative institute in castle street, London and demanded political status for Women and equality in all spheres on the basis that if they were inferior they would not be able to withstand open competition. Mrs. Besant frequently spoke about land system, cost of royalty, the obstructive power of the House of Lords and also demanded justice for the weaker nations. She condemned the aggressive and oppressive policy of England in Ireland, Transvaal, Afghanistan, Burma and Egypt. Later she became ill. This illness perhaps gave her required leisure to plan her future line of action. She decided, as she said, "to give myself wholly to propagandist work as a free thinker and a social reformer, and to use my tongue as well as my pen in the struggle. The desire to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry and superstition, to make the world freer and better than I found it all this

impelled me with a force that would not be denied”.^[4]

As soon as she recovered she undertook strenuous tours and sometimes she visited as many as twenty towns in a month.

She joined the theosophical society under the influence of Madam Blavatsky.^[5] In 1892 Madam Blavatsky died and Mr. Besant along with Mr. W.O. Judge became the joint head of the esoteric section of the society. From this time onwards she busied herself with the uplift of Indians and her work can distinctly be divided into four divisions each pertaining to a different period, involving different procedure and a different subject. Her first interest was religion and this work occupied her upto 1883 when she took up the cause of education. In 1893 she stepped from the field of education to that of social reforms – the cause she held dear till 1913, the year she turned to politics. It goes without saying that even though the subject, the problem and the period differed from each other, each overlapped the other.

Mrs. Besant dealt with the conservative element amongst the people by opening schools and colleges. She also spoke of theosophy and Hinduism and associated herself with Sanatan Dharm Palani Sabha, Banaras, founded by Colonel Olcott (one of the founders of the theosophical society) with the object of “

improving the morals of Hindu students and of engendering of love for Aryan simplicity and Aryan spirituality.^[6] She also associated herself with the Arya Bala Bodhini, a monthly journal in English, issued at the nominal rate of one rupee per annum, the aim being, through, “the agency of rising generation to restore to India her past greatness in her religion which is her only life and strength”.^[7]

Mrs. Besant raised her voice against the caste system. Her interpretation of the east was not very tasteful to the people with the result she had to face a certain amount of opposition, but this opposition was insignificant, because the majority were appreciative of her services to Hinduism. She also raised her voice against child marriage and untouchability.

Next her crusade for education, with the declared ideal that it was to be “an education founded on Indian ideals and enriched not dominated by thought and culture of the west. In 1887 she started working for the Hindu college at Banaras and was able to build a full – fledged college in the next two years. Mrs. Besant who had championed equality for women in 1885 in England had by now changed her views on the subject. She did not seek absolute equality for girls and felt that they had a different role to play. The girl “must be educated as the wife and mother,

not as the rival competitor of man in all forms of outside and public employment.^[8]

In 1906, Mrs. Besant organized within the theosophical society the Sons of India and the Daughters of India to work for social reforms. Later in 1913 a new body, the theosophical stalwarts appeared, each member taking a pledge to dissociate himself from certain customs. The next year it developed into an order of the “Brothers of service “ who pledged to disregard all caste restrictions.

Mrs. Besant preached the use of Swadeshi from an economic standpoint. “The intelligence department labeled this as political propaganda. Her tone of lectures throughout the year 1909 was moderate and she advised the students not to meddle with politics. She was in favour of gradual reforms and was of the opinion that India was not fit for self-government and universal suffrage must only be applied in municipal matters.^[9]

HER POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

During this period the veterans of Indians freedom of the standing of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Sri Pherozeshah Mehta were no more. Dinshaw Edulji Wacha was too old to do any active work: S.N Banerjee was not in line with the latest though, and M.K Gandhi had not yet taken the rein of political work in his hands. Lala Lajapat Raj was virtually

exiled in America Bal Gangadhar Tilak was released in 1914 after a long term of imprisonment, but he was in shattered health and thus unable to carry on the work – “ a circumstances which stood in the way of his undertaking energetic propaganda throughout India, moving on the wings of time and electrifying the people by an appeal to their emotions. This was left to be done by one older than himself in age, frail in sex, but enjoying a better known to the world and endowed with that dynamic energy which knows no fatigue and seeks no rest.^[10]

In 1912, Mrs. Besant organized a band of public workers namely. The Brothers of service with a view to promote union amongst the workers in the spiritual, educational and political fields under the parentage of Indian National Congress. During the same year – October and November - Mrs. Besant gave a series of lectures, as she said, “to mark the beginning of an earnest and concerned movement for the uplifting of India”.^[11] Hereafter she took active interest in politics of the country, She made a demand at a public meeting called by the Madras Congress Committee, that a standing committee of the British House of Commons for consideration of Indian affairs be established.^[12] She also suggested at the Congress Session of 1913 to sponsor a national movement

embodying religious, educational social as well as political reforms. She brought out a weekly paper the common weal to do the required propaganda.

Mrs. Besant opened her political campaign by giving a political lecture in January 1914 at Madurai (South India) which was presided over the Municipal chairman. The year also witnessed the beginning of the First world war. She supported the war efforts and advocated the cause of the Allies. Mrs. Besant urged others to support the war loan and herself raised six hundred recruits for the defence force.^[13] Later she herself was the first one to break the political truce and wanted to have a definite promise with regard to self – government before the War ended.

Mrs. Besant joined the congress in 1914 and she “brought new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organization and a new outlook into the filed of congress.”^[14]

FORMATION OF HOME RULE LEAGUE

The idea of starting a Home Rule league was first mooted by Mrs. Besant at a private meeting, while the congress was holding its session in 1915, in china Bagh, in Bombay, with Surendranath Banerjee in the chair. The need for starting such an organization was felt. She herself explained that it was because the congress

showed little activity between its annual sessions that the need for Home Rule League had arisen to be an active propagandist body and the words Home Rule were chosen as a short public cry, making the fact clear that the struggle was not against Great Britian, But for liberty within the empire.^[15]

Home Rule explained Mrs. Besant, did not necessarily mean democratic government, “It is not the form of government that makes Home Rule. It is that a nation is governing itself. A nation which by its own free vote, voted an autocracy will still be a self –governing nation.”^[16]

HomeRule for India was essential firstly, because, It is the birthright of every nation, and secondly, because her most important interests are now made subservient to the interest of the British Empire without her Consent and her resources are not utilized for her greater needs.^[17] Moreover, self government it necessary for the self-respect and dignity of a people, other government emasculates a nation, lowers its character and lessens its capacity.^[18] The objects of the league were

1. To secure self –government for India through law –abiding and constitutional activities i.e, agitation and propaganda, the constitutional way

being the best way to political evolution.

2. To maintain connection with Great Britain by becoming a free nation within the Empire under the Imperial Crown of His Majesty, the king Emperor George V. and his successor.
3. To support and strengthen the National Congress, which had labored for thirty years, to lay the foundation of Indian Self – government.
4. To carry out continuous educative propaganda on the necessity of Home Rule for India. ^[19]

The membership of the league was open to all men and women over eighteen years of age. School boys and students were not permitted to become members. Undergraduates could associate with the league and they could be enrolled full fledged members on ceasing to be undergraduates. The members had to pay ten rupees entrance fee and a life subscription. They (members) in return received a small silver badge and ribbons. ^[20]

The badge for the Home Rule League was a pointed star of the Indian Empire with Home Rule in red engraved in the centre. The colours were red (Hindus) green (Muslims).

The meeting convened by Mrs. Besant at Bombay in 1915 to elicit support from the national leaders to start Home

Rule League was not very encouraging for her as the leaders were not in favour of starting a separate organization. They, however, informed her that the congress would take up the work outlined by the Home Rule League. In view of this Promise Mrs. Besant agreed to wait till September 1916. However, Bal Gangadhar Tilak supported the idea and formed a Home League in Pune on 23 April 1916.

Mrs. Besant went all out to take the opportunity offered by the war and launched a vigorous propaganda. The two leagues, i.e., the one started by Tilak and the other inaugurated by Besant, worked together and pushed forward a strong propaganda for Home Rule in the country. Tilak's daily Kesari and weekly the Maratha and Mrs. Besant's weekly the commonweal and daily New India advocated the cause. IN the press or on the platform, Mrs. Besant criticized the foreign policy, the policy in regard to Home Charges, the method of recruitment in the army, industries the land tax and education.

Mrs. Besant said, addressing the students in the Hardinage Theatre at Calcutta, that in other countries the students were kept under discipline and they were encouraged to read the lives of great men thereby inculcating in them a spirit of patriotism and fostering in them a love of their country, When these students

went in to the world they were made to understand that the future of their country depended on their individual acts which identified them with their country. In India a student had to perform household work besides studies and when he left college he was a man, spiritless and often broken in health.

“If the country has to progress”, he said, “it is vital that the young of the country should be taught to appreciate their national greatness”.^[21]

Mrs. Besant felt that the whole system required a change i.e. change in Local Self Government, Provincial Government and in the Central Government, To make changes of this nature India must have her freedom and observe. “Who has the right to give to her or to withhold from her the freedom? She is not pauper begging for alms, for the crumbs of freedom, that fall from the tables of Western Liberty. She is discrowned queen claiming her heritage. Mrs. Besant demanded self government for it was better to have bullock carts and freedom than a train deluxe with subjection.”^[22]

Mrs. Besant held that no nation gave liberty to another nation, and a nation was fit for liberty the moment she determined to have it. However, Mrs. Besant could never dream of India severing relations with England. She

wanted India to be a member of the Commonwealth like any other dominion.^[23]

The Propaganda carried out by Mrs. Besant had far - reaching effect. Her example led the programme she had adopted to being adopted by other political bodies.

The New India of October 11, 1916 announced that there were fifty branches of the Home Rule League in principal provinces of India except the Punjab and the League membership was between two thousand and eight thousand.^[24]

In November the same year a Memorandum demanding political changes of a sweeping character was presented to the Government of India by nineteen members of the viceroy's council.

CONCLUSION

Annie Besant wrote a series of articles of self - government and announced her intention to lead a political campaign in favour of “Swaraj” - Her methods observed a Director of the Criminal Investigation Department, were highly objectionable as they inevitably led to inflaming racial feelings. Supporting the cause of India she said: The fact of British Empire hangs on the fate of India and therefore it is but wisdom and prudence to keep India contented by granting Home Rule to her. India was a tremendous

reservoir of manpower, far greater than America and Home Ruled India was an asset to the Empire in the struggle against German Militarism.

In the first issue of the Common weal she stated her political aims. In political reforms we aim at the building up of complete self-government from village council through district and Municipal boards and provincial legislative assemblies to a national parliament, equal in its powers by whatever name they may be called, also at the direct representation of Imperial Parliament, when that body shall contain representatives of the self – governing States of the empire.

Her writings and speeches during this period mainly dealt with arguments against the British rule i.e, the poverty of India, the drain (Home charges), employment of Indians in the public services, executive bias in the administration of justice, army commissions and railway policy. At the same time she paid glowing tributes to India's past greatness.

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