CHAPTER-I
CHAPTER – I

EARLY LIFE OF MRS. ANNIE BESANT

Women in India have played important roles in the country’s social and political life and its history. They have played such roles in every sphere of national activity from high learning to valour on the battlefield. Paying high tributes to the freedom fighters of India especially women of India, Gandhiji opined: It (Female Sex) is the nobler of the two, for it is even to-day the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. A woman’s intuition has often proved truer than man’s arrogant assumption of superior knowledge.

Annie Besant had devoted her life without any inhibition to the service of India although she was Irish by blood. She worked without any respite in all the four departments of human activity – Educational, religious, social and political – not only with energy and enthusiasm but with the clock work regularity and perseverance. Her work for India is a remarkable one. She was one who fought valiantly all her life for all those whose rights were ignored. She was a farsighted leader with clear and definite plans for the spiritual as well as the material regeneration of mankind.

Annie was a popular and versatile author and wrote for 40 years. She was the world’s best orator who continuously used her magic tongue for the welfare of the people she loved. It would be difficult to think of another individual with same wide range of qualities of intellect, organizational capacity of a high order, a courage of conviction which defied every obstacle and a warm and generous heart for poor. She acquired such traits in her early life. All these aspects had a base in her early life and can be traced from her connections with religion, atheism, free thought, fabian, socialist, and at last theosophy.

EARLY LIFE

Annie was born in London on October 1, 1847\textsuperscript{2}. This day is remembered by the Theosophist and the admirers of Annie throughout the world. Annie was known till her marriage as Annie wood\textsuperscript{3}. Her mother was of pure Irish descent and her father was Irish on his mother’s side though belonging to the Devonshire woods on his father’s. Her mother belonged to the Irish—one of the Morrices who boasted of their descent from some fabulous Milesian King’s hailing from France\textsuperscript{4}. The woods family on her father’s side had played more or less a notable part in local and national politics. The general circumstances of Annie’s father and mother’s families

\textsuperscript{3} P. Kodanda Rao, \textit{Foreign Friends of India's Freedom}, Bangalore, 1968, p.231.
\textsuperscript{4} Rajkumar, \textit{Annie Besant's Rise to power in Indian politics} (1914 – 1917), New Delhi, 1981, p.18.
in the few decades preceding her birth were symbolic of the changing social condition of England in the 19th century. In essence, Annie loved the Irish and Irish ways. She has remarked that "The Irish tongue is musical in her ear and the Irish nature dear to her heart".

Annie's father died on consumption when she was five years old. She says of him that he was keenly intellectual and splendidly educated, a mathematician, and a good classical scholar, a master of French, Italian, German, Spanish, and Portuguese with a smattering of Hebrew and Gaelic. It is worthy of remark in view of her later development that her father, though he was a student of philosophy was deeply and steadily sceptical. He had outgrown the orthodox believes of his days. Her mother was however deeply religious although as she herself remarks, she put on one side as errors the doctrines of eternal punishment, vicarious atonement and the infallibility of the Bible. Annie was mystical and imaginative, seeing visions and dreaming dreams. Sensitiveness to impressions other than physical ones was, in fact, a marked feature in the family to which she belonged. Elves and Fairies were very real to them. Her early days were quiet and sheltered, with emphasis on culture in her education.

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HER EDUCATIONAL LIFE

Though technically an English woman, she was always as said, an Irish woman. The Irish strain in her ancestry is seen in certain aspects of her character in the inquiring nature and also in a very subtle wit and instant retort. The death of her father in 1852 had left the family in serious financial straits. So her mother struggled hard and gave her two children the kind of education she wanted them to have. Hence the childhood of Annie was a period of struggle and anxiety on the part of her mother on account of financial troubles. After a great deal of thought, Annie’s mother selected the public school for Annie’s and her brother Harry’s Education.

Annie was by nature a sensitive girl. She spent most of her time in her grandfather’s house since she liked that place very much as it had a little strip of garden at the back and at the far end there were little nooks where she could sit with some favourite books. Her favourite books were John Bunny’s “The Pilgrims Progress” and Milton’s “Paradise Lost”. In her early days she was sincere and devoted Christian. She was anxious in her innocent girlhood to dedicate herself to Christianity. When she was eight years old, she was introduced to one important person who stood as a

8. Ibid., p.5.
As a young girl of 16 in England
turning point in her whole life. She was Miss.Marryat, sister of the well
known writer Captain Marryat

Annie loved Miss.Marryat very much and her gratitude to her was
very great. She learnt from her a lot and the best one was that she learnt to
speak fluently the French language. Besides from her early days, she had
much love and affection towards religions and hence she took religious
studies more seriously. Under Ms.Marryat’s training Annie’s religious
feeling received a strongly evangelical bent.

Ms.Marryat insisted young Annie that along with education all pupils
should interest themselves in social service. She got the permission from
Annie’s mother and took her abroad. They first went to Germany and
afterwards spent seven months in Paris perfecting French. When Annie was
spending her time with Ms.Marryat in Paris, she was very much fascinated
by the Solemn beauty of Notre Dane, LaMadaline and St.Roche. She also
attended the French classes of St.Roche. Then she returned to England
with perfection of French and German languages. Her religious nature was
deeply aroused by the colour, fragrance and pomp in the religious services.
She was at this time a highly accomplished girl of sixteen

* Miss Marryat: She was a born Teacher and she pioneered in many ways, the training of
children on the basis of the least pain and most enjoyment to themselves.
Annie's studies abroad of course had made her high and she immediately saw where her pleasure and her duty lay\textsuperscript{15}. So far as her inner life was concerned, she was still filled with passionate religious fervent and a philosophy which she characterises as really the human passion of love transferred to an ideal. Annie's mother did not disclose the domestic problems to her and shielded the childhood and youth of Annie from the touch of pain and anxiety\textsuperscript{16}.

**HER DEEP FAITH IN CHRISTIANITY AND HER MARRIED LIFE**

It was at this time that Annie concentrated on a study of the writings of the Fathers of the early Christian church. Looking back over these years, she made a touching and accurate observation that the keynote of her life, through all the blunders and blind mistakes and clumsy follies has been the longing for sacrifice as against self interest. In the year 1866, she was introduced to a clergyman, Rev. Frank Besant, a young Cambridge Don, who was serving as a deacon in a little Mission church in Clapham, a poor suburb of London\textsuperscript{17}. Annie's mother liked him and this resulted in the engagement of Annie with Frank Besant. Though Annie had no special love

\textsuperscript{15} Arthur H. Nethercot, *op. cit.*, p.31.
\textsuperscript{17} P. Kondanda Rao, *op.cit.*, p.235.

**FRANK BESANT** : He came from a family of wollen draper in portsea, Portsmouth. Annie idealized this clergyman as a messenger and servant of the Lord, since he cleared many of the doubts as the Christian Gospel.
for him her mother dissuaded her from breaking her alliance. So far as her inner life was concerned, she was still filled with passionate religious fervour and a philosophy which she characterised as really the human passion of love transferred to an ideal. Holding this view of religion, she idealised this clergymen as a special messenger and servant of the lord. Hence her engagement to Frank Besant took place within few weeks, and as she herself has said, she drifted into an engagement with a man she did not pretend to love. Then she married him in December 1867.

It was in this year (ie) 1867, the crisis of Annie Besant’s married life commenced distressfully. They were an ill-mated pair from the outset; he with very high ideas of a husband’s authority and a wife’s submission precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased where as Annie was accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive hot tempered and proud as Lucifer. She considered her married life as a fatal blunder. As she have stated that another kind of treatment instead of married life might have turned her into a fair imitation of the proper conventional article. In result, she lived with a wall of ice around her within which she waged mental conflicts that nearly killed her. To relieve her solitude, she began writing short stories as well as the lives of the saints. The short stories were published and brought her a cheque which gave her

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intense delight as it was the first money which she had earned and the pride of earning it was added to the pride of authorship. All these was done by her as she got introduced to a person called William Prowting Robberts, the "Poor Man's Lawyer" who kindled her interest in the outer world\textsuperscript{19}.

In 1869, a son was born and later on in 1870 a daughter was born to her. Their names were Digby and Mabel\textsuperscript{20}. In 1871, the two children got whooping cough and she stated that she fought with life and death for her children. Once when they were out of danger, Mrs.Annie Besant collapsed physically and then rose in her own language, to face a struggle which lasted for three years and two months. In between these problems, her married life was not happy because her husband did not understand her well and demanded complete unquestioned obedience which was not in her to give. Her husband aggravated the difficulties of her home life. So both differed from each other on many issues and misunderstanding resulted in their separation in 1873\textsuperscript{21}. This life and death struggle transformed her from a Christian to an Atheist\textsuperscript{22}.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 32.
William Prowting Robberts: He was a solicitor with offices in Manchester and London. He was also a good friend of Annie's Father.
\textsuperscript{20} C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, \textit{op.cit.}, p.13.
\textsuperscript{21} Annie Besant, \textit{op.cit.}, p.132.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
MRS. ANNIE BESANT AS AN ATHEIST

Annie Besant always being self examining doubts soon crept in her faith. It was the long months of suffering through which she had been passing, with the seemingly purposeless torturing of her little one as a climax that struck the first stunning blow at her belief in god as a merciful father of Men. She had been visiting the poor a good deal, and had marked the patient suffering of their lives; her idolised mother had been defrauded by a lawyer she had trusted and was plunged into debt by his non-payment of the sums that should have passed through his friends to others; her own bright life had been enshrouded by pain and rendered her degraded by an intolerable sense of bondage and there was her helpless, sinless babe tortured for weeks had left frail and suffering. The smooth of her previous life made the dissension more startling, and the sudden plunge into conditions so new and so unfavourable dazed and stunned her. Her religious past became the worst enemy of the suffering present. All the personal belief in Christ, all her intense faith in his constant direction of affairs, all her habit of continual prayer and of realisation of his presence—all were against her. The very height of her trust was the measure of the shock when the trust gave away.

Conventional consolations and conventional prayers, seemed to be an aggravation of suffering. Her religious wretchedness increased the
unhappiness of home life. She ceased to believe in certain church dogmas. Hence she began to study heretical books including the works of Robertson, Stopford Brooke, Stanley, Greg, Mathew Arnold, Liddon, Mansel and others. She found relief from mental strain in practising social welfare work, nursing the sick and helping the poor. She then learnt many truths regarding agricultural labour and she studied the activities of Agricultural labour unions which at that time, incidentally were opposed by the farmers who gave no work to an union man. As such Mrs. Annie Besant's change of sudden attention from religion to Atheism, the two different poles surprised those who know her from her younger days. Hence she became the champion of all the oppressed individuals and causes she came across, in any part of the world. It was at this time, she came across Mr. and Mrs. Scott who made their home a centre of heretical thought and Mrs. Annie Besant's free thought essay was written for Thomas Scott. She was able to earn some guineas as a monthly income which was sufficient for her respectable starvation. She wrote for Mr. Scott's pamphlets on Inspiration, Atonement, Meditation and Salvation, Eternal Torture, Religious Education of children etc.

The next phase in her life was marked by her conviction that religion gave no help and no opportunity to mankind for advancement and the only possible solution seemed to be in science, so she took up scientific study. Her plan was to take the degree of Bachelor of Science in the University of London and later that of a Bachelor of Medicine. She passed the Matriculation Examination of London University, and then the Intermediate Examination with honours in all subjects required. This proves that she had a very good scientific brain. But any way she did not go on to the B.Sc., Examination, since one of the examiner in the university told her beforehand that however brilliantly she might do the papers which were set, he would not pass her because he had a strong antipathy against her Atheism and to certain of her activities for the masses which he considered immoral, so she had to give up studying for the degree.

But she did not only study science, she did something much more directly important. She began teaching science, for science to her was the gospel of truth, we find her issuing manual after manual on science, each quite small, as the result of certain classes for the masses which she conducted. They are like small text books and worth reprinting with of course some changes. It was like this that she tried to make science the gospel of life for all.

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27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
HER ENTRANCE IN FREE THOUGHT SOCIETY

It was in 1874, that Mrs. Annie Besant joined the Free Thought Society\(^29\) and attended a lecture of Charles Bradlaugh. As Mrs. Annie Besant has often stated, from the first meeting in the Hall of Science she dated a friendship with Charles Bradlaugh that lasted unbroken till death severed the earthly bond which to her stretched through Death’s gateway and linked them together. Bradlaugh and she became intimate friends. It was he who taught her that “No steady work can be done in public unless the worker studies at home far more than he talks outside” - Be your own harshest judge, listen to your own speech and criticise it, read abuse of yourself and see what grains of truth are in it\(^30\).

Strengthened by this friendship and fortified by Bradlaugh’s example, Mrs. Annie Besant progressed from stage to stage that she herself have remarked that as an Atheist, she neither affirms nor denies the possibility of phenomena differing from those recognised by human experience. Holding these views, it must, at the same time, be realised that she was filled with a passionate desire for the bettering of the world and the elevation of humanity. To her therefore, a lofty system of ethics was of much greater

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\(^{29}\) C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, *op. cit.*, p.17.
Charles Bradlaugh: A Good Speaker of saxon-English. He is known for his extreme courtesy in private life especially to women. He was always welcomed in France, Spain, Italy by both men and women of the highest social work.

importance than a logical, intellectual conception of the universe. She did not believe in God; she believed that it was only through science that there could be any kind of happiness of mankind. In the year 1879, an English poet, Gerald Massey saw that she though an Atheist, was ever championing the cause of the oppressed, and he wrote a poem which was the most striking because he never met her, he only knew about her. But in this poem, he gave a brilliant description of her as had ever been given.\footnote{31. Besant’s Diary of Principal events (1847 – 1933), p.5.}

A Greeting by Gerald Massey:

Annie Besant, brave and dear,
May some message uttered here
Reach you, ringing golden clear.
Though we stand not side by side
In the front of battle wide,
Oft I think of you with pride.
Fellow-soldier in the fight!
Oft I see you flash by night
Fiery-hearted for the Right!
You for others sow the grain;
Yours the tears of ripening rain;
Theirs the smiling harvest grain!
Fellow-workers we shall be,
Workers for eternity;
Such my faith. And you shall see
Life’s no bubble blown of breath
To delude the sight till death,
Whatsoe’er the unseeing saith.
Love that closes dying eyes,
Wakes them too, in glad surprise.
Love that makes forever wise.

Soul – whilst murmuring, “There’s no soul”-
Shall upspring like flame from coal,
Death is not life’s final goal.

Bruno lives! Such spirits come,
Swords immortal, tempered from
Fire and Forge of Martyrdom.
You have soul enough for seven;
Life enough the earth to heaven;
Love enough to create Heaven!
One of God’s own faithful few,
Whilst unknowing it are you,
Annie Besant, bravely true.
Above all, her friendship with Charles Bradlaugh, her noblest friend, made her very prominent. For many years, she worked together with Charles Bradlaugh and raised the Free Thought Movement to a unique height of intellectual vigour. She was to assert that the chief debt of gratitude she owed to free thought was that it left her mind open to new Truths and encouraged the most unshrinking questions. The wonderful charm of her oratory, and the fire with which she denounced religious intolerance made her an outstanding figure in public life, though in those Victorian days, there was scarcely any calumny which was not spread about her by her orthodox opponents. Then from 1875, she started her career as lecturer on free thought and undertook lecture tours. She herself admits that her lecturing acted as a tonic. She worked ardently in the Free Thought and radical Movement. She and Bradlaugh became the principle exponents of the Free Thought.

On all her lecturing tour, she began to explain first about Atheism and then about Free Thought. Thus saying, Atheist is one of the grandest titles a man can wear; it is the order of merit of the world heroes. Most great discoverers, most deep thinking philosophers, most earnest reformers, most toiling pioneers of progress have in their turn had flung at them the name of

Atheist. She told that the saviours of the world are too often howled at as Atheist and then worshipped as Deities\textsuperscript{33}.

Mrs. Annie Besant slowly and steadily became an ardent supporter of Charles Bradlaugh. She worked with him for women’s liberation and birth control. She read a copy of the journal “National Reformer” which was the journal of the National Secular Society of England\textsuperscript{34}. The leading spirit of the society was Charles Bradlaugh. Hence Mrs.Annie Besant became the member of the National Secular Society. She became the Co-editor of the journal and used her great gift of eloquent expression in the cause of Free Thought\textsuperscript{35}.

On August 25\textsuperscript{th} 1874, she gave her first formal lecture to a public audience in the Co-operative Institute in Castle Street, England. She selected her theme “The political status of Women”\textsuperscript{36}. On September, 25\textsuperscript{st} of the same year, she spoke on the “True basis of Morality” at Mr. Mancure Conways Chapel at St. Paul’s Road, Camden Town\textsuperscript{37}. As things were going on like this in the life of Mrs. Annie Besant, circumstances plunged her into a series of dramatic struggles, the first of which was the battle for the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Annie Besant, \textit{op.cit.}, p.131.
\item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p.134.
\item \textsuperscript{35} S.P. Sen, \textit{op.cit.}, p.154.
\item \textsuperscript{36} C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, \textit{op.cit.}, p.20.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Besant’s Diary of Principal events (1847 – 1933), p.35.
\end{itemize}
publication of the "KNOWLTON PAMPHLET", which was published by Charles Bradlaugh and Mrs. Annie Besant after careful deliberation. It was to be published in order to test the right of free discussion on the population question.

Charles Bradlaugh and Mrs. Annie Besant were prosecuted for publishing and selling this Pamphlet. Mrs. Annie Besant defended her action in the court of law by saying that they both honestly believe that all questions affecting the happiness of the people, whether they be theological, political or social, the fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards. However her plea went unheeded and she was imprisoned for six months and a fine of two hundred pounds. But she moved for the writ of error and the sentence was quashed. When she was released from the jail, she spent her life by championing the different causes. She also wrote a pamphlet on "The Law of Population". She also learnt from Mr. Charles Bradlaugh the Constitutional method of agitation.

38. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, op. cit., p.22.
HER ENTRY IN FABIAN SOCIETY

In 1885, when Mrs. Annie Besant met George Bernard Shaw, the famous English writer she joined the Fabian Society\textsuperscript{41}. In selecting the Fabian Society for her passages through socialism, she had made a sound choice. Now at this time, Mrs. Annie Besant became the greatest orator in England and possibly in Europe.

It was at this time, that her husband moved to take her little babe away from her, claiming that she was a 'unfit' person because of her ideas. This plunged Mrs. Annie Besant into a second case\textsuperscript{42}. The record of it makes very striking reading as revealing both Mrs. Annie Besant’s ability and the harshness of the judge. For many days she was herself her own counsel, and met point after point of law an obstruction placed before her, both by her husband’s lawyer and the Judge. She lost the case, and the deprivation of her child caused her profound grief. Later both the girl and her elder brother, when they attained their majorities became devoted admirers of their mother and always remain as such\textsuperscript{43}.

Besides considering the world from Shakespear’s point of view as a stage in which all the men and women are merely players, Mrs. Annie

\textsuperscript{41} New India, October 18, 1947, p.4.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p.6.
Besant, a player of genius, was a tragedian. Comedy was not her clue to life; she had a healthy sense of fun; but no truth came to her first as a joke. Injustice, waste and the defeat of noble aspirations did not revolt her by way of irony and paradox: they stirred her to direct powerful indignation and to achieve resistance. Now the Fabian vein was largely the vein of comedy and its conscience a sense of Irony. Her powers of continuous work were prodigious. Her displays of personal courage and resolution, as when she would march into a police court, making her way to the witness stand, and compel the magistrate to listen to her by sheer force of style and character, were trifles compared the way in which she worked day and night, proved her superhuman nature.

The only permanent interest the Fabian Society could have for her personally lay in such advance as it was capable of towards a religious philosophy, hence her spiritual interest in the society died\textsuperscript{44}. It was at this time, she realised her inadequate knowledge of philosophy and made efforts to study the same. Thus she studied the hidden sides of consciousness, spiritualism etc., and so she bestowed more attention to the study of philosophy\textsuperscript{45}.

\textsuperscript{44} Besant's Diary of principal Events (1847 - 1933), p.19.
\textsuperscript{45} Indian Review, January, 1924, p. 706.
In July 1889, she went to Paris as one of the Socialist Federation leaders to attend the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution\textsuperscript{46}.

By 1889, the land question, the incidence of taxation, the cost of royalty, the obstructive power of the House of Lords influenced her much and the final stage resulted in her entrance of the Theosophical Society\textsuperscript{47}. Indeed the two volumes of the ‘Secrete Doctrine’ by Madame Blavatsky won her to Theosophy. In 1889, Annie Besant met Madame Blavatsky. Whenever she had an opportunity to meet Madame Blavatsky, she raised her doubts, and when all her doubts were cleared, she became a member of the Theosophical Society\textsuperscript{48}. Thus Mrs. Annie Besant had been diverting her attention firstly from Religion to Atheism then to the National Secular Society, then to the Fabian Society and finally to Theosophy. She joined the society in 1889 and in 1893 she came to India to deliver her spiritual message. From this time onwards, she lived in India and contributed much to education and Hindu revival by lecturing, founding schools and by translating Hindu Texts to English. As C. Rajagopalachari said, “She helped Young India to feel sure of the greatness of Indian culture and Religion”.

The entry of Annie Besant in Indian sphere of Theosophical Movement had given a new life, to which had been for sometime, to all outward appearances atleast in a listless condition. (See also Appendix-I)

\textsuperscript{46} The Theosophist, August, 1889.
\textsuperscript{47} Arthur H. Nethercot, \textit{op.cit.}, p.307.
\textsuperscript{48} Besant's Centenary Issue (1847 – 1947), p.46.