Chapter V

Annie Besant's Concept of "The Indian System of Education of the Vaidic Period".

This chapter has been devoted to a survey of Annie Besant's views about the Indian system of Education during the Vaidic period and other allied facets of it.

It would be interesting to note that Annie Besant's educational writings constitute a voluminous literature but she did not write any single work systematically developing any particular thesis on education like an academician in the nature of Spender's 'Education' or Montessori's 'Methods'. Annie Besant's books on education, chiefly lectures, touch all aspects of education cursorily and so her direct and indirect utterances have been collected to bring them together to form a proper answer to the problem in hand.

Annie Besant had a firm belief that the Vaidic India of the ancient times has a priceless legacy. She studied thoroughly the philosophy and the Wisdom of India with reverence. She revived the memories of the glories of past of India, to which even many Indians were ignorant. She lectured incessantly on the Gita, on the Upanishads, on the hidden system of the Puranas; she educated the scoffing youth of India to
reverence the Rishies of the Vaidic age. She awakened the Indian heritage in order to educate them on the educational system working in the Vaidic times. She tried her best to revive the ancient Indian ideals of education of the Vaidic times by founding the Central Hindu College, Benares and a large number of schools and colleges in other parts of India where she made her efforts to create Vaidic environment through her lectures about Mahabharata, Ramayana, Great Rishies and hermits of Vaidic times and gave students the glimpses of that age when India was really a highly developed country having a wonderful well-planned system of education.

Though Annie Besant was modern of the moderns but in matter of education of the Indians she did not like to break her ties with the past. While speaking in a lecture Annie Besant implored upon that the question of education must be taken up, designed and carried out, by those who are not only the lovers of their country but who are also men who understand its needs and as well as aware of its peculiarities, of its characteristics, and of its traditions. To be truly useful Education must be founded on a knowledge of the past of country......it must be designed in accordance with the ancient traditions. ¹

Annie Besant lived in modern times but she did not wish to belong to the modern India, she always talked and

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revered the bygone days. While reviving the memory of India's past Annie Besant says "the India to which I belong in faith and heart is......a civilization in which spiritual knowledge was accounted highest title to honour, and in which the people reverenced and sought after spiritual truth......The India I would give my life to help in building is an India learned in the ancient philosophy, pulsing with the ancient religion......intellectually noble and spiritually sublime".¹

Annie Besant had a great admiration for the Vaidic system of education when learning was regarded as "greater than wealth and rank, the fillet of wisdom as more worthy of reverence than the jewelled diadem of kings".² She revered those old Vaidic institutions of knowledge which were born on the Indian soil, breathing in Indian air and nourished by Indian traditions. In those institutions the true ideals of education were fully known.

In the Vaidic period the system of education constituted of the forest schools which were known Ashramas.

Describing the education of the Ashramas Rabindra Nath Tagore writes: A most wonderful thing that we notice in Ancient India is, that here the forest not the town, is the fountain-head of all its civilization......There trees and plants, rivers and lakes, had ample opportunity to live in close relationship with men.

¹. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, dated 22nd March, 1894, Annie Besant contributed an important article to this paper about her future policy in India.
"In these forests, though there was human society, there was enough of open space, of aloofness; there was no jostling. Still, this aloofness did not produce inertness in the Indian mind; rather it rendered it all the brighter. It is the forest that has nurtured the two great Ancient Ages of India, the Vaidic and the Buddhistic....The current of civilization that flowed from its forests unundated the whole of India". ¹

The Vaidic system of education was self-controlled and while the state profited by it and from it drew its dignity, religion, morality, effectiveness and efficiency, government exercised over it no control and did not interfere with its management. Kings built universities and other institutions of learning and bestowed on them wealth, but claimed in them no authority. Annie Besant mentioning the highest honour given to the learned teacher by the people writes "A Monarch might enter into the Convocation of a University, but no one rose to great him and he took his seat like any other visitor; but on the entrance of its Head, the "Venerable of Venerables", all rose and turned their faces towards him and in silence awaited his words. The University was the Temple of Learning, and the learned were its only Hierophants. When Learning visited Royalty, when a Wise One entered a Court even Shri Krishna descended from His throne and bowed at the feet

¹. The Vishva-Bharati Quarterly, April,1924, p.64.
of the Sage". ¹

In the Vaidic period the education of the child up to the age of seven years seems to have been more in the home than in the school. From seven to fourteen the boy was to be taught and trained in school and then to pass on to the University.

In the Ashramas of the Vaidic period the sages taught the pupils the supreme literature comprised of the Hindu Sacred books; the Epics, the Puranas, the Darshanas, the Yoga Shastras, the Arthashastras and Nitishastras. The supreme literature was so difficult that it could not be understood in its deepest meaning except with the aid of meditation and the discipline of the Raja Yoga. In the early Vaidic period the use of the art of writing was tabooed for a long time for the preservation of sacred literature. The knowledge continued to live only in the memory of scholars for several centuries. Secular literature had not yet come into existence, grammar and arithmetic were yet to be developed.....Primary education in the sense of the knowledge of the 3 R's was thus impossible". ²

In the later Vaidic period when the forests were no longer used for establishing Universities, the new universities began to be built in scenes of natural beauty, surrounded by lovely gardens, fragrant with blossoms and shady with

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trees, surrounded by a high wall with guarded gates. The
site of an insignificant village may sometimes be selected,
because of its beauty. The influence of natural beauty on
the development of the mind was considered very potent fac-
tor necessary for the education of the pupils.

The number of students attached to an Ashrama some-
times surprises one. As there was no problem of room in
the forests, so to limit the number of the students was not
a very considerable issue "Kalidasa speaks of Kanva, the
sage as Kulapati i.e., a sage who feeds and teaches ten
thousand students".¹ In 'Modern Review' of August 1923
Prof. Kulkarni writes: "It would be extremely entertaining
to the imagination to try to depict a mental picture of an
educational institution that consisted of ten thousand stu-
dents, all bright, pure, inspiring faces, living together,
learning together. Even such a big number in an educational
institution was not a novelty in Ancient India".² Later,
we note that in some of the great Universities the number
of students under one teacher was limited to 500.

The Forest Ashrama had two specialities: one was the
huge number of pupils studying under a single sage, the
second was the occasionally great length of the student's
life, some pupils may remain in a Forest Ashrama till their
hair had turned grey. Studious adults would long remain as

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² Kulkarni, R.G: "A University in the Shakuntla", an article
in the Modern Review of August, 1923, p.216.
pupil of a much respected Sage, giving their time to meditation and profound philosophical study and also to helping the Guru with the younger pupils.

(A) **Objectives and Ideals of Vaidic Education:**

In the educational system of Annie Besant there is nothing more necessary than the holding up of certain objectives and ideals before the minds of the youth. She believed that one of the greatest defects in the education of the boys in India is the absence of the presentation of the objectives and ideals and the consequent absence of enthusiasm. Annie Besant has planned some objectives of education for the Indian education, but as these also present her ideas about Vaidic education, so these have been given here. Annie Besant writes:

"What after all is the object of Education?

"To train the body in health, vigour and grace, so that it may express the emotions in beauty, and the mind with accuracy and strength.

"To train the emotions to love all that is noble and beautiful; to sympathize with the joys and sorrows of others; to inspire to service ever widening in its area, until we love our elders as our parents, our equals as our brothers and sisters, our youngers as our children, and seek to serve them all; to find joy in sacrifice for great causes"
and for the helpless; to feel reverence for all who are worthy of it, and compassion for the outcast and the criminal.

"To evolve and discipline the mind in right thinking, in right discrimination, in right judgement, in right memory.

"To subdue body, emotion and mind to the Spirit, the inner Ruler Immortal, making the mind the mirror of the Ego, the emotions the mirror of the Intuition, the body the expression of the Will.

"To put all this in a single sentence:

To make the man a good citizen of a free and Spiritual Commonwealth of Humanity". ¹

**Ideals of Education in Vaidic times:** In her philosophy Annie Besant attaches great importance to the ideals because ideals always flower into the life of the society. Defining an Ideal, Annie Besant says, that it "is a fixed idea; it is created by the mind; it is nourished by desire; it presses ever outwardly into the world of manifestation seeking to express itself in action". ² Every country and every age has its own ideals according to the nature of the Thought which is the generating seed, so is true of the Vaidic education which has some high ideals, which burst into the blossom producing a special educational system of its own.

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¹ Annie Besant, "India: Bond or Free?", pp.147-48.
In her lectures and writings Annie Besant discussed some ideals of Vaidic education, which were prevalent in that time. Some of the ideals have been collected from her work, which are as follows:

1. Vaidic education suited to the needs of the time:

   Vaidic education had no fixed curriculum. That education had a well-planned but flexible curriculum which was adjusted according to the current needs of the society and time. With a change in the needs, the curricula also changed.

2. Vaidic Ashrams in the forests:

   It is worthy of notice that in the Vaidic age forest was the fountain-head of all civilization. Education, rather higher education, could only be received in the forest-Ashrams where sages taught in calm and natural environment. This was the cause that pupils learnt sublime philosophies or artistic masterpieces of very high order.

   Annie Besant, writing on the Ideal of Ashram education, says "The essence of that ideal is not the forest as such, but the being in close touch with Nature; to let her harmonies permeate the consciousness, and her calm soothe the restlessness of the mind. Hence it was the forest, which best suited the type and the object of the instruction in the days which evolved kishis; instruction which aimed at profound rather than at swift and alert thought; which cared not for lucid exposition by the teacher, but presented
to the pupil a kernel of truth in a hard shell which he must crack unassisted with his own strong teeth if he would enjoy the kernel; if he could not break the shell, he could go without the fruit: instruction which thought less of an accumulation of facts poured out into the pupil's memory than of the drawing out in him the faculty which could discover a truth, hidden beneath a mass of irrelevancies; of such fruitful study the Hindu Ashrama in the forest is the symbol.  

In the later Vaidic period the open-air forest universities gave place to buildings having scenic beauty and shady trees around them.

3. Observance of Brahmacharya: During Vaidic period the rule of Manu for the student was strictly observed: simple dress, plain food, hard bed and the vow of the Brahmachari. There were no exceptions: Prince, noble or a common student, all were treated alike. Annie Besant writes "A boy was given into the hands of the teacher, or Guru when he was of five or seven years old, or sometimes later. From that day forward he lived in his teacher's house, serving him and studying under him, the period of study being nine, eighteen or thirty-six years, or until he had mastered his studies, and sometimes even lasting throughout the life...... During the whole of this period the student was under the obligation of

absolute chastity". Under the vow of virginity and until the student period was over, he was not permitted to enter the house-hold life.

4. Religion as the integral part of Vaidic education: In Vaidic times religion was the core of education. It was not only taught by the sages to the pupils, but both of them lived religion as a way of life. Annie Besant gives a very important place to religion in the education of the child. To her religion is the foundation of education because "First, Religion is necessary as the basis for Morality; Secondly, religion is necessary as the foundation of original literature". As an ideal of Vaidic education, religion held a supreme position. From early morning till night all the activities of the students and the teachers were performed religiously according to the approved rules of the sacred books.

5. Caste based on Vocation: In the Vaidic age caste and Vocation were synonyms. With the change in Caste the vocation also changed and with a change in vocation caste was got to change. Annie Besant considers that as society in the Vaidic "Ideal was a community of rational beings, not a fortuitous concourse of atoms, it was regarded as an organism, a body politic with definite organs, each discharging a definite function, for the benefit and health of the whole community. This system was called Caste, and it was necessarily built up

Shri Krishna said in Bhagavad Gita "The four Castes were emanated by Me, by the different distribution of qualities and actions; know Me to be the author of them, though the actionless and inexhaustible". Annie Besant takes Lord Krishna's utterances as true "essence of Caste; the Utilisation of physical heredity to provide bodies suitable for the manifestation of the qualities was an advantage, but unessential, and could only be secured by the co-operation of Devas with men, the men following the Dharma laid down for each Caste and thus preserving a sub-type of physical body, to which the Devas guided the appropriate egos, i.e., the egos who had evolved the given "distribution of qualities". The group of qualities was that which fitted the ego to discharge one of the functions of one of the fundamental organs of the body politic: Education, Spiritual, intellectual, moral, physical; Government; Organization of Production and Distribution; Production..... There are the predominant and essential groupings of qualities, whether they are called Castes or Vocations. In the Aryan Race, the four great groups were called Castes and Caste was a scientific system of Social Service according to the inborn qualities of the individual, birth being a convenient, but not essential concomitant".

Annie Besant is fully convinced that the Ideals of Vaidic education have been completely ignored in our modern education, so she "resolved to revive the Ancient Ideals of Indian Education and Indian Culture......to make Indian Ideals the basis of Indian Civilization, renouncing the hybrid and sterile ideals of anglicised-Indianism, and to adapt them to a new form, instinct with the Ancient Life, and moulding it into a glorious new body for the Ancient Spirit".¹

(B) Curriculum of Vaidic Education

As the history of Vaidic education was spread over many centuries so we naturally find remarkable changes must have taken place in the curriculum in the course of long time. The curriculum was always closely linked with the conditions and the aspirations of the society, so change in curriculum due to change in society was inevitable. In this period Vedas formed the core of curriculum. But Vedas were also re-arranged and re-edited at long intervals to suit the capacities of the people at different periods of history”.²

In Upanishads we find an exhaustive list of all that was studied in the time of Vaidic age. The list of subjects includes a good deal more than merely a knowledge of the hymns of the Vedas. The extra-ordinary range of subjects taught in the ancient Universities is amazing, and the more so when we remember that a student was apparently expected,

² Annie Besant: "Shall India Live or Die?", p.37.
In many cases to know by heart the book he studied. Annie Besant writes "A Brahmana learning one, two, or three Vedas had to learn each by heart, and twelve years' study was assigned to each. Pandit Vasudeva Sarvabhauma was the head of the great university of Nadiya, and it had no college for the study of the Nyaya philosophy. Only one copy of the text-book of Nyaya was extent, and that was in the possession of the University of Mithila. This University refused to allow a copy of the book to be made, but Pandit Vasudeva was not daunted. He went to Mithila as a student and learnt the text-book by heart. Then going back to his own University, he opened a college for Nyaya."

A long list of subjects which a pupil had to learn in the Vedic age will surely amaze us. In the Chandogyopanishad (VIII,11,2) we find Narada went to the Lord Sanat Kumara and asked for instruction. The Supreme Sage asked him what he already knew, and Narada replied "O Lord I have read the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda, forth the Atharveda, fifth the Itihasa-Purana, the Veda of the Vedas (Grammar), the Tithals, the Rasi (the science of numbers), the Daiva (the science of portents), the Nidhi (the science of time), the Vakoskya (Logic), the Ekayava (ethics), the Davavidya (etymology), the Brahmavidya (pronunciation), Siksha, Ceremonial, Kalpa, prosody, Chhandas), the Bhutavidya (the science of demons), the Nakshatra-vidya (astronomy), the Sarpa-the

Devajanavidya (the science of serpents or poisons, the science of the genii, such as making of perfumes, dancing, singing, playing and other fine arts). All this I know, Sir...

The Brihadaranyoka Upanishad gives also a somewhat similar list of subjects namely Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvanga, Itihasa (legends), Purana (cosmogonies), Vidya (knowledge), the Upanishads, Slokas (Verses), Sutras (prose rules), Anuvyakhyanas (glosses), Vyakhyanas (commentaries).\footnote{Keay, F.E.: 'A History of Education in India & Pakistan', p.31.}

In Takshashila the curriculum was extensive. The sages taught in this University, eighteen Vijjas and the Shilpas, words used for literature and science, and for Arts and Crafts. The use of arms was taught, as we read of skill in archery and javelin-throwing in that time. But before joining the University the students was expected to be educated and must be sixteen years old at least.\footnote{Shall India Live or Die?', Op.cit. p.41.}

The extracts, given above, clearly show how the curriculum of the Vaidi institutions was developing. But mostly the students were taught according to their caste. The Brahma followed Literature as a rule, while Kashttriya learned less Literature, but become more skilled in the use of arms. Medicine and surgery and anatomy were there for the future physician, Mathematics for the astronomer. The
courses include so much that to follow them all was manifestly impossible.

Annie Besant finds a highly developed University Education in the Vaidic period "for the classes in which deep learning with the object of life, and for those by which Government was carried on, the sons of Brahmanas, of monarchs and nobles, and also of wealthy members of the great merchant community, the organizers of production and distribution: the organizers of production and distribution: the sons of the two latter classes were trained in the Universities in an understanding, not only of literature and science, but also of arts and crafts, so that on their return home they might intelligently examine and supervise their practical carrying out of artists, craftsmen and artisans, thus keeping up a high level of production in the villages, as well as setting a good example by attacking to their own courts or home artists of special skill or of inborn genius, who produced their work at leisure, amply provided with the necessaries and comforts of life".¹

The forest universities had a curriculum which was directly related to the life of the society. The subjects were taught with precision and understanding so that the students may have a practical knowledge of their courses of subjects. The main emphasis was laid on the utility of a

subject so that the student might be able to grapple with the deepest and difficult problems of life. Writing about the practical utility of the Vaidic curricula Annie Besant says: "We read how young princes, returning from some great university of their time, visited the village artificers to see that they were keeping up to the required level of excellence. It is also worthy of note that great religious Teachers of high rank, such as the Rishi Narada, visited the courts of Kings, not merely to give instructions or guidance on high questions of policy, but also to enquire as to the matters which concerned the efficiency and prosperity of those employed in manual work, e.g. asking whether the artisans were properly supplied with the materials for their labour. Under these circumstances it was only natural that the universities should train sons of the "twice-born" cast (Brahmanas) in the Shilpashastraas, previously mentioned, the Scriptures of Arts and Crafts.¹

During the later part of the Vaidic age we find institutions of learned men, such as the Saughamas of Madura, whose imprimatur was sought by writers as the stamp of merit on their works. The fame of these institutions spread over Asia, and later, over Europe, so the students flocked to them from neighbouring lands. In these schools, subjects, given below, were taught: the five Siddhantas, Logic,


( C ) Methods of Teaching:

In the Vaidic age the highest education that produced its greatest literature demanded a man's whole life, the earlier part thereof consecrated to study accompanied by much meditation, and the later to the practice of Yoga and the teaching of specially-trained pupils who were to become teachers in their turn.

The Vaidic age did not provide any advanced method of teaching. With the ideal of simplicity of life the methods of education were also simple and directly touching the life of a child. The all-round development of personality was aimed as the chief function of that education. The educational training of the child, writes Annie Besant, "began in the recesses of the forests, wherein a great sage would attract to his Ashrama number of pupils, whose faculties were there developed by the method of meditation, the working out of an abstruse problem, set by the teacher in a brief form, by intense and prolonged concentration upon it, aided by a simple and well balanced and moderately ascetic life".¹

Annie Besant has tried to explain the general method of teaching in vogue in the Vaidic times. She writes that

"A teacher would give an aphorism, say, to his pupil and send him away to meditate on it, and to bring back the result to him, when he had reached a definite understanding thereof.... Such exercises drew out the latent powers of the student, and may explain the profundity of thought of the great Teacher of the past. They were not concerned with explaining a difficulty, but with stimulating the intellectual powers of their pupils so that these themselves might overcome it".  

Key gives a very interesting description of the method of teaching followed in the Vaidic times. This method has been recorded by Gautama, who says: "Taking hold with his right hand of the left hand of his teacher, but leaving the thumb free, the pupil shall address his teacher saying, "Venerable Sir, recite". He shall fix his eyes and his mind on the teacher. He shall touch with Kusa grass the seat of the vital airs (i.e., the organs of sense located in his head). He shall thrice restrain his breath for the space of fifteen moments. And he shall seat himself on the blades of Kusa grass the tops of which are turned to be east. The five vyahritis (i.e., the mystic words Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah, Satyam, and Purushah) must each be preceded by the syllable Om and with Satya. Every morning the feet of the teacher must be embraced by the pupil. And this must be done both at the beginning and at the end of a lesson in

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the Veda. After having received permission, the pupil shall sit down to the east or towards the north, and the Savitri must be recited. All these acts must be performed at the beginning of the instruction in the Veda. The syllable Om must precede the recitation of other parts of the Veda also.¹

The regulations recorded by Gautama may seem to us meaningless, but they were regarded very valuable by those who used them in Vedic and later times. These must have been intended to impress upon the pupils the devoted sacredness which was supposed to characterize the knowledge which was being communicated to the pupil by the teacher. The most important object of life of the teacher of that time was to transmit the exact contents of the holy literature and the sacrificial and other rules of religious life as he himself had received them by his own teachers.

The teacher in the Vedic times had to teach only such students who satisfied all the rules of studentship, laid down by the great sages. He would sit at a proper place specified for the teachers. If he had only one pupil or two, they would sit on his right side; if more, they must sit as there was room for them. Keay writes, "At the beginning of each lecture pupils embrace the feet of their teacher and say, Read Sir. The teacher answers, Om, Yes, and then pronounces two words, or if it is a compound, One. When the

teacher has pronounced one word, or two, the first pupil repeats the first word; but if there is anything that requires explanation, the pupil says, Sir; and after it has been explained to him (the teacher says) Om, Yes, Sir. In this way they go on till they have finished a prasna (question).... At the end of the last half-verse the teacher say, Sir, and the pupil replies, Om, Yes, Sir, repeating also the verses required at the end of a lecture. The pupils then embrace the feet of their teacher, and are dismissed.'

Besides helping the pupils to memorize the sacred books the teacher was in the habit of giving explanations when required by the pupils. These explanations were very important because they helped in the clarification of many difficult issues cropped up from the study of sacred literature. The Sutras were composed in condensed form and were studied together with a commentary. In order to illustrate their points the teachers made use of parables from nature or some stories. We find that 'Panchatantra' and the 'Hitopadesa' were given a very important place in the inculcation of mortal truths. Besides teaching Vedas, the later Vaidic teachers made good use of fables and allegories in instructing the pupils. The use of fables and allegories must had been felt a psychological necessity in order to relieve the monotony of the laborious process of learning.

by rote every bit of sacred literature.

In the Vaidic institutions mostly the system of teaching was individual and each pupil was instructed separately so as to pay individual attention because of the individual differences in the pupils. But there were some occasions when the teacher explained to all the pupils the same knowledge at the same time.

In the earlier stages of Vaidic age writing was totally unknown in India, but in the later stage, when the writing came into use the task of teaching writing was also added to the work of the teacher.

Here it would be very interesting to know how the learned sages made the selection of the students for admission to the Vaidic institutions. Prior to admission to the institution the child had to be thoroughly examined by the expert teacher about the experience and knowledge already possessed by him.

In the University of Vikramashila a magnificent building was attached to the University Campus to maintain the open-air character of the forest universities, here the method of selection for admission was a typical one. Annie Besant writes: "A high wall surrounded such an abode, sometimes with a single door, and a learned pandit was the door-keeper, who put the would-be students through an examination, ere he would open the door for his admission -- a literal entrance examination, for the applicant could only enter when he had argued
in satisfactory fashion with the door-keeper. 1

(D) Discipline:

Discipline is the traditional conception of education in India. Education as discipline or Training is the notion that has come down to us through the ages; specially the Vaidic teachers took it their important function to act on the child, to modify his original nature, in order to lead to a desirable and clearly envisaged results.

In the Vaidic period the life was simple and so simple rules of behaviour were observed by all. A teacher had very simple philosophy of teaching. He made no distinction in a rich and a poor student. He treated all in the same manner. Discipline in that time was mild. Quoting Manu Mazumdar writes that a teacher’s main duty was to “give instruction for the benefit of his students, without doing injury (by way of punishment) to them, and by using sweet and mild words. But when a pupil committed grave faults he was beaten with a rope or split bamboo on the back part of his body only, and never on the noble part. He who would strike him otherwise would incur the guilt of a thief”. 2

It shows that there were some definite rules of discipline in the Vaidic age prescribed for the students. It was felt that student’s life must be characterized by

dignity, decorum and self-discipline and must be devoted in the acquisition of not only learning but also culture and religion of the race. For infusing piety in the students it was laid down that students should regularly offer the prescribed prayers and sacrifices, both morning and evening. For inculcating good etiquettes and manners it was insisted upon that students should offer proper respect to their elders and teachers. In order to develop character emphasis was laid on moral earnestness. Those things which tend to accentuate the sex impulse were forbidden for the pupils, articles such as meat, sweetmeats, spices, ornaments and garlands etc. Even royal students, staying in an Ashrama were not allowed to have any private money, lest they secretly buy any prohibited article. Annie Besant narrates as a story of the poverty of a prince studying in the ancient Ashrama. She tells "A prince broke a poor man's food bowl and the owner asked for its price; the prince gave his name and that of his state, and promised to repay it after his return, but he was there entirely without money",\(^1\) and was studying there in the Ashrama like a poor man's lad.

A plain life of the student was always recommended; students were to shave their heads clean, bathe once in a day, no oiling or dressing of the hair and the students were not allowed the use of shoes, umbrellas and

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cots. Food and dress was though simple but it was sufficient. The aim in prescribing these rules was to enable the students to form a number of useful habits during the formative period of childhood and adolescence, which were considered to be of good use to them throughout their lives.

(E) Education of Women

In her concept of the system of education during the Vaidic period, Annie Besant gave an important place to the education of women. Through her thorough study of the ancient Vaidic literature, she was fully convinced that the education of women in the Vaidic times was by no means neglected. According to her, women were trained in religious knowledge and were familiar with the great Indian epics and with much of the Puranas, to say nothing of the vernacular religious literature. They would learn by heart thousands of lines of these, and would also have stored in their memory many 'Stotras'...... They were thoroughly trained in

2. Annie Besant writes "The Prince of Benares is sent to Takasila for his studies with the modest equipment given him by his own royal father 'a pair of one-soled sandals, a sunshade of leaves, and a thousand pieces of money', as his teacher's fees, of which not a single pice could he retain for his private use. Thus the Prince enters his school as a poor man, divested of all riches". Given in India: Bond or Free? Op. cit. pp.116-117.
house-hold economy, in the management of the house, and the knowledge of the duties of dependents and servants. They were skilled in medicine and were the family doctors, and many were highly skilled in artistic needle work and music.\(^1\)

The education of women of that time directed to fit them to discharge their functions in life and render them competent to fulfil their weighty duties belonging to them in Indian family life of that time.

In the education of the girls family played a very important role in the Vaidic times. But we find some rare cases of girls being educated at boarding institutions. Altekar refers to an instance, taken from the drama 'Malatimadhava' where it is mentioned that "Kamandaki was educated at a college along with Bhurivasu and Devarata",\(^2\) but such cases were exceptions, for there was a general prejudice in the people against sending their girls outside home for receiving education. It was greatly insisted upon that girls should be taught at home by their parents. Thus home was the main centre of education of girls in the Vaidic times.

There is a convincing evidence to show that women in the ancient times were eligible for the privilege of studying the Vaidic literature and performing the sacrifices enjoined in it. Women were learned as men were learned, and they even taught the Vedas as men were teachers. This would look

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rather surprising to note, writes Annie Besant, that "some of the mantras of the Vedas, some of the hymns of the Rg-Veda were originally given through women; through their mouths the sacred mantras were spoken......Not only is it true that some of the Rg. verses were given by women, but we also find their names in the list of spiritual teachers, in the list of great Acharyas, who form the chain of spiritual teachers.....In the Upanishads you read of such a knower of Brahman as Gargi, who questioned Yajnavalkya in the great assembly of sages, being given her place there to put questions as she would".1

In the ancient times women students were divided into two classes, Brahmavadinis and Sadyodvachas. The former were lifelong students of theology and philosophy; the latter used to prosecute their studies till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16. During the eight or nine years that were thus available to them for study, they used to learn by heart the Vaidic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers and for those rituals and sacraments in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. The Sadyodvachas also learnt music and dancing and when writing came into general vogue they were initiated into the three R's as a matter of course.

Brahmavadinis used to aim at a very high excellence in scholarship. Besides studying the Vedas, many of them

used to specialise in Purvamimansa, which discussed the diverse problems connected with Vaidic sacrifices. In that time many dialecticians and Vedantists were women like Gargi, Atreyi, Maitreyi etc. who made real contribution to the advancement of knowledge, for they enjoy the rare privilege of being included among the galaxy of distinguished scholars. Annie Besant had a great praise for the Brahmavadinis as they "wore the sacred thread, had the right of kindly the sacred fire, studied and taught the Vedas......these were female ascetics......carrying the danda, wearing the ascetic robes ......appearing in the very court of the King to carry on discussion on subtle points of religion and philosophy", composed poems some of which have been honoured by their inclusion in the sacred canon. The orthodox tradition admits that women had a special place in Vaidic times, man could perform the Vaidic sacrifices only if he had his wife by his side. Annie Besant writes: "We find that the women of the house-hold -- the wives and mothers -- enjoyed a large amount of liberty and took their part in a number of public ceremonies. Some of the hymns of the Rg-Veda, just mentioned, were written by wives. We also find records in the Rg-Veda itself of great festivals attended by women who were wives and mothers. We find in the Samayana, that Kaushalya, the mother of Rama Chandra, was actually the most prominent figure at a great sacrifice at

1. Ibid. p.108.
which were gathered vast crowds of kings, of nobles, of Brahmanas and of the people at large. She performed the act of sacrifice,..... took part in the discussions that occurred between their husband and sages, as in the cases of Draupadi and Sita..... In those days women were really wise and great, that their counsel was highly valued, that their advice was respectfully listened to and followed, because knowledge gave them the authority to pronounce their opinion.¹

On the basis of her thorough study and understanding of the Vaidic system of education of women Annie Besant planned a scheme of education of the Indian girls. This planned scheme was not a true carbon copy of the Vaidic system of women education but it had many preservable features of Vaidic system. Annie Besant also incorporated some assimilable principles of western education in her scheme of women education in order to make her scheme upto-date and sound one. She implemented her scheme when she established women colleges and schools through out India. Her scheme of women education will be studied in detail in the next chapter.

(F) Importance of the Child

While receiving education in the Vaidic times a child had no importance of any kind, he had to study that which the state considered necessary for its future citizens to

learn. Annie Besant fully believes that Vaidic "systems of education were framed to suit the politics of states and the child had to conform to the particular system".\(^1\)

Annie Besant, as an educationist, had given an important place to the child in her system of education. She regarded a child a pivotal necessity in the system of education and recommended that good education must revolve around the child and his capacities.

She firmly believed that a child "is the Eternal Spirit clothed in matter, comes back again into the physical world with the qualities, mental and moral, that he has woven, during his life in the Heaven world, out of the experiences that he gathered in his previous life period on earth......the child who comes into our hands is not a blank sheet of paper, on which you can write anything you choose, but he has many things written on him already. He has brought with him a definite character, a developed or undeveloped sense that we speak of as conscience, and we have to deal with him, with the character, with the conscience he brings with him; wherever he got them from, he has them when he comes into our hands, in the family and in the school".\(^2\)

To Annie Besant a child is not a blank sheet of paper to be written upon by the social institutions of the time, but he is a living spiritual intelligence with an immemorial

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past behind him and an incalculable future stretching in front of him. He is not a new-comer on this world and he does not come for the first time into this world through birth. She writes "Everytime that he (child) returns, he brings with him the harvests of the past, of past struggles and past defeats and past victories, and the difference between child and child, which shows itself even in infancy, is the difference of the evolution that lies behind them, and the consequent possibilities of the future that lies in front... He is not a white, empty sheet on which you can write what you please. He is a living being, reacting to your touch according to the nature he has created in his past".¹

Annie Besant's belief in the reincarnation theory had a very close affinity with the scientific theory of heredity. Modern physiologists and biologists admit that a child inherits all the past of his ancestors and of his race. So Annie Besant developed her theory of the importance of the child both by the thorough study of literature concerning reincarnation and heredity. She advocated a theory of education, which was based on her conclusions arrived at, after her copious study. She writes that a child has "inborn faculties, with characteristics inherent in him, however, he may have come by them, whether due to his own experiences or his ancestry....... The educator must recognize these

individual peculiarities, if you are to educate him aright".  

Annie Besant wanted to plan such a system of education which may give a full recognition to the nature of the child. She gave a sound lesson to the educators of all the times, when she wrote: "You must understand your child before you can teach him. You must find out what the child wants to know, and what his capacities fit him to learn, and remove the incapacities if he has any".  

Annie Besant's system of education based on her understanding of the child and his natural tendencies will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

(G) Teacher Training

In the works of Annie Besant there is no reference, anywhere, to show the conditions and position of the training of teachers of the Vaidic age. Even in the history of Indian education, it does not appear that any institution like Teacher's Training colleges of the modern time existed, in the Vaidic age. It must have been, therefore, the custom of the Vaidic time that no further training was deemed necessary for the learned person in order to qualify him for the teaching profession. Only students with good cramming power and capacity to meet the challenge successfully through the fiery

1. Ibid. p. 85.
2. Ibid. p. 85.
ordeal of Sastrartha (debates) proved later on efficient teachers. To become a successful teachers the persons were required to have powers of debate and discussion incessantly for long time. The graduates of a Vaidic University, through the Sastrarthas, had a fairly good experience of presenting and justifying their points well and this was the most important qualification required of a teacher for the higher education.

( H ) Vocational Education

To Annie Besant vocational education is that education which fits a man "to take up some particular work in the state". Under the Vaidic system, youths were trained for the future vocational functions inside the four-walls of the house, under the direct guidance of the parents. Each family belonged to a particular caste or vocation. Each caste gave a particular vocational education and experience to its children and thus specialization in a special field was the chief function of that time.

In Vaidic India the central thought was the Family -- the man, the woman and the children. The dominant thought of the family was that of mutual obligation, which closely bound a man to the social organism. Children received their vocational education inside the home according to their

particular caste. At that time society was divided into four castes into which all vocations existed and the parents prepared their children to participate in their vocations from very early childhood. So the vocational education was learnt practically rather than theoretically. The main castes with their vocational functions have been explained by Annie Besant as "There were first the Brahmans, the spiritual caste, the teachers of the young, the teachers of the people in the spiritual life, the students, the priests, the literary class — the class, that is, that includes the great intellectual professions as well as the spiritual order, and consists of those who are naturally, by their intellectual and spiritual qualities, fitted to be the guides and teachers of the people. Then after them the Kshatriyas, the warrior caste, the royal and ruler class, the class that administered justice, that saw to the administration of the state, that defended it from internal disturbance as well as against foreign aggression. Then the Vaishyas, the merchant class, that included all the commercial and trading classes and the agriculturists. And lastly, the Shudras or the serving caste. Those four castes are those which were originally instituted and those which still remain, though masked by the innumerable sub-castes".  

The caste-system had given stability to Indian life

1. Annie Besant: "India, Her Past and Her Future", p.41.
of the Vaidic age because castes preserved the vocational sanctity necessary at that time for the people. These four castes existed as the four great schools guiding, helping and training the society in the vocations of the parents very successfully.

(1) **Development of the Total Personality of the Individual.**

The education given to the children in the Vaidic age provided four-fold training and thus developed the total personality of the individual child. Through Vaidic education every part of man's nature received its proper training. The result was that, writes Annie Besant "when the boys went out into the world, they went out ready to play their parts as members of a great state, as citizens of a great nation—highly pious, moral, learned and strong."¹

Vaidic education was four-fold in its nature. The education given to a boy was one which drew out his powers in the four great factors which form the human constitution. The boy was placed in the hands of his teacher to be trained and educated on every side of his nature. Vaidic education aimed at building up a true man of the world, complete in all respects. The four-faceted programme of Vaidic education has been greatly appreciated by Annie Besant in her many lectures and writings because she believed that that education

helped very much in the development of the total personality of the individual.

Let us see how Annie Besant approached the process of total development through the four-fold system:

1. The Knowledge of Scriptures: To Annie Besant the knowledge of scriptures was the primary important aspect of the Vaidic education. She writes: "Firstly we always read of boys that were versed in the Vedas. The boys were taught religion; they were trained in the sacred literature of their faith, and in the actual daily practice of their religious ceremonies. Thus we find that Ham Chandras was not only thoroughly trained in the knowledge of the Scriptures, but also that he performed His Sandhya morning and evening; and was thus trained in the outer religious duties, as well as in sacred learning, both being necessary for the evolution of spirituality......Under the wise hands of His teacher, He learned the great Science of the Self, the Secret of Peace; His religious nature was trained and developed".¹ In the same way the teachers of the Vaidic age gave their full attention to the teaching of the sacred science of Vaidic literature to their pupils and withheld no part of it from their pupils.

With the passage of time when the Vaidic literature

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¹ Ibid. p.19.
took a definite shape and new rules and regulations were formed, a new literature, known as Sutras, came into being. The sacred books which had to be mastered by the students had increased to huge bulk and it was necessary to condense their teaching into some convenient form. The Sutras or 'threads' consist of pithy phrases, in which condensation and brevity have been carried out to such an extent that the result was often an obscurity which could only be explained by a commentary. But it was essential for every student of scriptures to commit to memory the important Sutras because they were considered as the storehouse of sacred literature.

In praising the Vaidic sacred literature Annie Besant writes: "It is this great literature, belonging to India as a whole, the knowledge on which her sublime religion is built, that is the rock on which India's nationality is firmly founded. The absurd idea that her feeling of Nationality has grown out of British Rule is too silly for discussion....The English "man in the street" has never heard of Jambudvipa, of Aryavarta, the land of the Aryans, of Bharatavarsha, the land of the Bharatas. He has never heard of the Hindu prayers which name the seven sacred cities in extreme north and extreme south of India, as in extreme east and west, nor of the pilgrims who travelled to these, familiar to every Hindu in his daily prayers."
The philosophical and religious literature is common to all India, and is studied all over India. The same Rishies, and sages and saints are reverenced all over India, and every Indian is equally proud of them. These are the foundations, in the thought and life of her people of their sense of Nationality.¹

2. **Training in Morality**

The second important facet of the Vaidic education was the moral training. The moral, as well as the spiritual nature were thoroughly trained by the Vaidic teacher. "The students were taught", writes Annie Besant, "to be obedient, reverent, truthful, brave, courteous, to love and respect their parents and teachers, to be unselfish, to concern themselves with the welfare of those around them."²

During the Vaidic period rigid rules were laid down for the moral and religious training and the regulation of good manners of the pupils. Keay writes: "It was the student's duty to bathe daily, and to avoid honey, meat, perfumes, garlands, sleep in the day time, ointments, collyrium, a carriage, shoes, a parasol, love, anger, covetousness, perplexity, garrulity, playing musical

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instruments, bathing (for mere pleasure sake), cleaning the teeth, elation, dancing, singing, calumny, and terror, and all pungent foods. The pupil was enjoined always to speak the truth and to avoid bitter speeches. He was always to speak in a respectful manner of superiors.  

The student made to intend on the welfare of others. In giving moral education the teacher instructed the pupil saying: "Say what is true? Do thy duty. Do not neglect the study of the Veda. Do not swerve from the truth. Do not swerve from duty. Do not neglect what is useful. Do not neglect greatness. Do not neglect the learning and teaching of the Vedas." Thus moral education of the Vaidic times helped a great deal in the formation of moral character of the pupils.

3. The Training of the Intellect:

The third important facet of Vaidic education was the training of the intellect. Annie Besant writes that in the Vaidic age "the boys were taught the different branches of science and instructed in various kinds of theoretical and practical knowledge. Intelligence, the third part of human nature, received its proper training.
along with the spiritual and the moral.¹ A well-organized curricula was taught in the forest schools of the Vaidic times. The subjects of studies were taught only according to their immediate and practical utility.

Annie Besant writes: "The highest Hindu intellectual training was based on the practice of Yoga, and produced as its fruits, those marvellous philosophical systems, the six Darshanas and the Brahma Sutras".² which are still the delight of scholars of today.

4. Physical Education:

Fourthly the Vaidic education stressed at the training of the body. Annie Besant writes: "The physical part received due attention. They were taught games and manly exercises, to ride, to drive, to manage their own bodies, and the bodies of the animals who served the need of man".³

Besides the four-fold education system of the Vaidic time, Annie Besant also appreciate the Vow of Brahmacharya recommended by the Vaidic teachers to the students to be followed during the period of student life. She writes: "I find every student was under that vow of

virginity, of absolute celibacy; and until the student period was over, he was not permitted to enter the household life. Thirty-six, eighteen or nine years — these are the periods given for student life. During that period absolute celibacy was imposed upon the students.\(^1\)

After undergoing the four-faceted programme of education and the vow of Brahmacharya the boy, who returned home after completing his education, had all-round development of him, he had full flush and vigour of manhood in him ready to enter the duties of life.

In this chapter we have only studied Annie Besant's concept of Indian system of Education of the Vaidic period and her views with regard to different aspects of education of that time. But how Annie Besant tried to apply her knowledge of Vaidic education in her scheme of national Education for India by establishing colleges, schools and planning a national university of India, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.