CHAPTER - VIII

FINAL ASSESSMENT OF ANNIE BESANT'S WORK AS AN EDUCATIONAL THINKER.

Having surveyed the educational philosophy, educational experiments and contribution to Indian education of Annie Besant, we may now attempt a broad assessment of her work as an educational thinker.

It is a strange phenomenon that an active politician and philosopher to be a most serious educator of country's education and devoting the best part of her life, energy and resources to the cause of Indian education. Annie Besant pleaded in this context that for material and political prosperity of India a well developed and systematically planned educational programme is very essential. In her lecture "India's Awakening" she stated: "When the educational life has again been pervasive then only can material prosperity safely return". When she arrived in India in 1893 she found very unsatisfactory conditions of Indian education. She saw that education was too bookish and mechanical, stereotyped and rigidly uniform and did not cater to the different aptitude of the children. Nor did it develop those basic qualities of discipline, co-operation.

1. Annie Besant: India's Awakening (a lecture) p.2.
and leadership which were calculated to make children function as useful citizens. There was no place of spiritual, religious and moral culture in the educational system. Apart from the positive suffering which these conditions entailed, the Indian education had no place for freedom to perform any creative activities.

It was therefore quite natural that the prevailing system of education with its narrow aim and lifeless methods produced a deep dissatisfaction in her mind when she studied thoroughly the Indian educational system. She felt an acute spiritual unrest deep in her soul when she found the Indian educational system, which has taught religious and philosophical education for age to the west, again shrouded in Godless and unreligious educational system. She impressed upon her theosophical colleagues and other educated people in India for the need for religious and moral education. Thus the foundation of the C.H.C. Benares was laid in 1898.

Annie Besant had not founded the C.H.C. to experiment on any new educational theory. It is none the less true that when she arrived in India her mind had already been pre-occupied with certain fundamental principles and the general pattern that she was about to start. Ten days before her actual arrival in India for the first time, on
November 6th, 1893 in a lecture delivered on board the Kaisar-i-Hind, she had said "India's future lies not in political greatness; India's future is as a spiritual nation, as the teacher of the world in spiritual truth". 1 Annie Besant had herself admitted that the picture of the education imparted in the Vaidic India had inspired her imagination for long through her studies of Ramayana, Mahabhartta and Vedas, and it was for these epics that she had devised a pattern of education which she adopted in its essentials for the C.H.C. Benares, because of its intrinsic educational value and also its great message for the modern India. It should however be stated that Annie Besant was not a solitary example in turning to Vaidic Indian traditions for inspiration for her educational ideas, but as we have already explained the other educational contemporaries of Annie Besant in the first and second chapters of this dissertation, it would be sufficient to say here that in the wake of Indian educational reform movement, inaugurated by the Brahmosamajists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others, there was a general upsurge in the country to glorify the past achievements of India and to revive some of their salient features in the educational and other fields of Indian life, as a result a long array of educational

institutions were to be seen all over India on lines somewhat similar to those of the Central Hindu College, Benares, notably Shantinikatan by Rabindra Nath Tagore and Gurukula at Hardwar by Swami Sharananda.

It was not mere accident that Annie Besant chose historically important places and sites for her educational institutions. Annie Besant was a great lover of art, traditions and history. While choosing Benares for the site of her college and her schools, Madanapalle for the site of her National University, she gave the clear proof of her love for educational traditions.

General appraisal of Annie Besant's educational works:

While attempting to make a general appraisal of Annie Besant's educational works, we find several broad points at once strike us as significant and impressive.

The very first point is the sheer volume of Annie Besant's educational writings and addresses. Many of her addresses have not been recorded, and even if recorded, have been little known, being buried in the oblivion of unfamiliar journals and documents. Many of her writings also may have been lying in similar obscurity. The letters that she wrote to numerous friends and colleagues on educational topics must be legion, out of which only a fraction has been printed by Arthur Nethercot and Esther Bright. But the amount of her writings that is more or less accessible
and familiar is, nevertheless, impressive.

The bibliography of her writings alone lists nearly 107 separate items of essays, addresses and pamphlets, the 8 textbooks planned and prepared by Annie Besant, and the various items found in a variety of publications of miscellaneous nature. This refers only to those writings which have been traced or properly collected in familiar books and takes no account of all the numerous letters, unrecorded or undiscovered addresses, writings lying in obscurity.

The time factor is also quite significant. Even if we start calculating from 1874 when her first educational writing, "On the Religious Education of Children" was published and come down to "Ideals of Education in Ancient India" an address in the All Asia Educational Conference, Benares on 27th December, 1930, her last popular address; we find that Annie Besant thought, wrote and spoke on educational subjects for a full stretch of fifty-six years. Her activities as a practical educator dating from 1898 when she established the C.H.C., Benares and her close contacts with the day-to-day working of the various institutions that she had started, made her to understand and solve the problems of Indian education. In this course of more than half a century, she was closely connected with most of the major educational movements in the country, either participating directly in the deliberations of the sponsors of
those movements or offering her opinion and counsel through writings and addresses.

Annie Besant had been known in India and abroad not only for her political, philosophical, religious and social work, but also, above all, for her educational work especially for her founding the C.H.C., Benares. Though her excellent work as a public worker had been commemorated at the Queen Hall London Jubilee Demonstrations on July 23, 1924 where more than 500 delegates from many and various organizations, representing almost every branch of progressive work in the world were present to congratulate Annie Besant for her triumphs in all her public activities, but more laudably were appreciated her educational ventures. Although Annie Besant’s educational theories and schemes have not been studied at all as they should have been, but the C.H.C., Benares and her National University have been fairly well-known in knowledgeable circles as very progressive centres of education and culture.

Annie Besant not only lectured and wrote on educational problems for more than half-a-century but she was also a practical educator in the real sense of the term, in as much as she founded and ran a number of educational institutions, where she conducted her pioneer experiments in the practical fields and herself taught classes at different periods for a considerable length of time. Some
great educators in the history of education also like Plato, Aristotle, Comenius, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey had the distinction of playing this dual role of an educator and a teacher.

Annie Besant's recognition as an educational thinker, may be said to have started with the publication of her small article "On the religious education of children" when she was hardly of twenty-seven years. It attracted the attention of some educational experts. Charles Bradlaugh, the author and politician, appointed her as a joint-editor to assist him and write articles covering social and educational issues. In November 1888 Annie Besant was elected as a member of the London School Board, thus coming in touch with the practical problems of education. When she arrived in India in 1893 she began to take active interest in the educational problems of the country. She wrote articles in newspapers about Indian education. It would be useless to note here the long list of her educational articles which were printed in the papers and journals of India. It is also a vastage of time to account for the numerous convocation and inaugural addresses delivered by Annie Besant at universities and educational institutions of India, the last being her convocation address to the University of Mysore, delivered on October 29th 1924 and a series of Kesala Lectures entitled "Indian Ideals in Education,
Philosophy and Religion, and Art" for 1925 in the Calcutta University. The above facts should undoubtedly serve to prove that Annie Besant's recognition as a leading figure in the world of education had been established for long.

There was hardly any important educational problem of fundamental nature which escaped Annie Besant's notice and to which she did not supply any workable solution. The first breath of any significant movement in the educational atmosphere stressed her being, and she fanned it with all the force of her mighty personality, till it gathered strength and volume enough to assume the character of a regular movement. This was so when she first started championing the cause of the mother tongue both as a subject of study and as a medium of instruction. The same thing happened with the movement for mass-education and rural reconstruction, which acquired force with the passage of time.

Criticism of Annie Besant's Educational Work:

Annie Besant has been criticised by some critics for repetition of ideas in her works and for too much stress on spiritual values in her schemes of education.

(i) Duplicacy of Ideas:

The charge of duplicacy of ideas laid against Annie Besant as an educational thinker is partly true. She herself has confessed to it in different contexts. This
defect of repetition is greatly found in her lectures because she was not a cold arm-chair intellectual but was a practical educator. Because she had to make tours of whole of the world to deliver her message and influence always a new audience by her lectures, therefore some repetition had to occur in her printed lectures. Prof. K. G. Saiyidain makes an interesting observation in this context. Apologizing for repetition of ideas in his book, "Education and International Understanding" he writes: "There is a repetition of ideas, which would be out of place in a systematic thesis but may perhaps be overlooked in a collection of this kind, if only because they serve to stress and underline certain ideals and values which I regard as supremely important and which cannot -- if I may say so be emphasized too much in the present set up of the world". Both the pleas in the above observation fully apply to Annie Besant.

Because of the availability of repetition of ideas in her works, it does not mean that Annie Besant's thinking had been entirely static and did not register any growth of evolution. The preceding chapter would disapprove any such wrong inference: for it would plainly bear out how Annie Besant's constantly alert and sensitive mind reacted to the important events of educational significance in the country and abroad, and how her educational thought and activities

underwent modifications and evolution from time to time.

(ii) Stress on Spiritual Value:

Another objection that may be raised against Annie Besant's scheme of education by materialistically inclined critics, is its emphasis on spiritual values. She greatly stressed the inclusion of religion in the life of school and college. "There is no knowledge" she wrote "more necessary for a boy then the knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of his religion. This knowledge should therefore be imparted to him to simple elementary form in school, and in further detail in college".\(^1\) We have seen in the previous chapter the importance of religion in her scheme for all the levels of education.

But the emphasis laid on religion may appear to a modern mind too vague and against the background of the increasingly insistent secular needs of modern life, which would much rather demand social and economic efficiency and democratic leadership than would suffer the vital issues to be confused and clouded by spiritual considerations.

But the stress on religious and spiritual values, in the secular context, has not become obsolete in modern educational thought and is to be found even in progressive

\(^1\) Annie Besant: "The Place of Religion in the Life of a Student", compiled in 'The Birth of New India', p.393.
educational circles. Indeed there is a firm consideration and awareness among educational thinkers that the most of the ills of modern education are the outcome of the want of religious inspiration.

Sir Richard Livingstone, while discussing the conditions of University Education in England in 1947, regretted that there was little place in it for meditation on God, contemplation on the higher values of life and recommended "some study of religion or philosophy or of both should be included"\(^1\) in all the courses in the universities especially for undergraduates. Prof. Brubacher also stressed that "the reversion to an emphasis on religious education was a more significant event than might appear on the surface".\(^2\) Even great educational thinkers of modern India like Vivekananda, Dayananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Tagore and Rama Tirath, have all demanded the religious and spiritual orientation of education.

The above references are only to show that Annie Besant's emphasis on religious and spiritual values is not old-fashioned or out of place need, she had given a right lead to a significant movement in recent educational thought.

**Annie Besant's Original Contribution to Education:**

In concluding this work a question can be invariably

\[1.\text{Livingstone,Sir Richard: 'Some Thoughts on University Education', p.}\]
\[2.\text{Brubacher,John S: A History of the Problems of Education, pp.353-54.}\]
asked "what has been Annie Besant's original contribution to Education?" Every great educator is required to pass the test like the rest. Before the question is answered with reference to Annie Besant, it would be necessary to make some preliminary considerations.

If 'original' means something completely new, few great educators of the past can ever be regarded as 'original' because the history of education bears that either they reflect some past thought or have formulated into powerful operation some contemporary trend of thinking, having given a local colour and name. Secondly, the mere fact of resemblance between the earlier and a later thinker does not bring the conclusion that the former has influenced the latter. Finally, even if a successor reflects the ideas of a predecessor on a particular aspect, the approach of the two to the same aspect may be quite different.

Annie Besant was no more completely 'original' than great educators like Plato, Rousseau, Dewey and Gandhi because she reflected as much as they, some past or contemporary thought. In the second chapter of this work we have attempted to assess the various influences on Annie Besant, which proves that her educational ideals had deep and powerful roots and did not originate in the air. It is the great merit of Annie Besant's educational thought that it reflected so much of the excellent educational
thoughts of the world, past and present.

She organised ideals, principles and methods borrowed from the greatest educators and thus formulated a workable scheme of education which was a combination of Indian and Western educational thoughts. Thus her educational ideas and experiments appeared strikingly fresh and original. She was thus the greatest prophet of National Education for her revolt against the unrealistic and mechanical system of education that had obtained a deadening hold on the country since the introduction of the Western system of education under the British. She waged a battle to uphold the highest educational ideals before the country and made experiments at her educational institutions.

One outstanding distinction of Annie Besant's educational work is that it represents a synthesis of the educational ideals and methods of the East and the West. This is a valuable contribution and it reflected her philosophy of life when she says "whether it be from one side of the world to the other, there is only One Life, and we are one in Him, and we shall bring the outer lands together because the Inner Life is ever one." It is well known that Annie Besant, though Irish by birth, was a foremost ambassador of eastern culture to the west, this was also true in her comparatively specialized field of education.

Though the genius of Annie Besant is very great as she has formulated a sublime system of education in a detailed and clear manner; though her system clarifies all the aspects of human experiences and tries to amalgamate the best of Indian and European philosophical and educational thought to evolve a practical educational solutions for the ills of people of India; yet her critic, Geoffrey West believes that Annie Besant "originated nothing, gave nothing to the world which otherwise it must have lacked but which now is its imperishable heritage that what she did was simply — it is a great service -- to hasten processes already existing. The modern spirit would have come to birth without her, even had it been born more difficulty, after delay. She has been in this respect an assistant than a creator; she has added to the sum total of progress only relatively and though her immortality in her work can be considered assured, it is not unlikely to be an anonymous immortality".¹

Geoffrey West's criticism though is hostile towards her contribution but it regards, no doubt, her work of some assistance, if not a creation, to the cause of service of her fellow beings. Her great contribution to the cause of Indian education cannot become worthless only by unsympathetic criticism of any one writer. Kanji Dwarkadasa

¹ West, Geoffrey: The Life of Annie Besant', p.263.
writing about Annie Besant says "when she landed in India for the first time in November 1893, she found educated Indians were inclined to hang their heads in shame at their culture and their past. They accepted meekly the superior and patronizing criticisms from uninstructed critics as valid and it was impossible for Macaulay to assert that there was more truth and consolation to be deprived from a single English book than from all the literature of the East. But Mrs. Besant changed all this. If today the Indian feels proud of his past and hopeful of his future, if he is proud that his country is an important member of the comity of nations, these beliefs were created and fostered principally by Mrs. Besant, who popularized Indian scriptures and made India acquainted with her own heritage... If one person more than other must be attributed the beginning of the feeling of true patriotism, hardly any will hesitate to mention the name of Annie Besant". ¹

C. Jinarjedasa wrote in the 'Theosophist' of November 1947 about Annie Besant "Thousands, though most of them now gone, will have said of Annie Besant that, because a Light shown through her, they who had set in darkness had "risen" to a wondrous discovery of themselves and of Life. Such is always the case with great souls who in our humanity are as yet only a few...... years ago she wrote in a friend's

album: "Climb for the sake of those behind". It was written in a book of extracts from her own writings; there is one sentence among them which reveals the soul of Annie Besant "I had rather be blinded by the light than sit wilfully in the dark". It is because of this glorious spirit in her in search of truth, at the cost of every suffering and sacrifice that we can all attest that God showed sufficient of His Light through her to us". ¹

Annie Besant always worked to shed light of knowledge and wisdom on the others. Her work for education and religion inspired dozens of men and women who opened schools and colleges in India to serve the nation. In the early years of the twentieth century many young men were inspired by her to dreams of service of the nation. She accepted them as of her band just as they were, she did not ask of them any remarkable achievement, but she did ask the pure spirit of service. She changed their lives by the trust she placed in them to do their best, and her sympathy was always in their failures. She did not criticize them — her criticism of them she kept to herself -- but she always encouraged them and uplifted them and prepared them to serve the nation fully and whole-heartedly.

There are many admirers of Annie Besant who applaud her work very much and consider her as the architect of

Modern Indian education. Besant, who remained an active theosophist for many years, found some rare qualities of self-confidence, hunger for work and courage as the three great qualities appearing sufficiently to account for the phenomenon of her sufficiently to account for the phenomenon of her career while making a critical estimate Besant wrote: Mrs. Besant was not a woman possessed of that magic force of personality which in itself leaves a mark on the world..... Those who knew Mrs. Besant as contemporaries think of her merely as an honest, energetic, able and eloquent woman. She lacked the magic touch. Nor had Mrs. Besant great intellect, though she was without doubt a woman of exceptional ability. She had a great facility for absorbing information, mastering it, and giving it out again in lucid terms. But abstractions, generalizations, philosophical thought, even analytical acuteness, were beyond her; and ..... repeatedly fallible was her judgement.  

When we go on piling views of different authors and critics on Annie Besant, it becomes a difficult task to arrive at a clear understanding of her true personality by merely keeping to one side the appreciation of friends and to the other the hostile remarks of the critics, to weigh her ideas, activities and writings. It would be

better if we try to understand her thought through her own writings. A passage from her essay on Auguste Comte, written in 1885 gives a reflection of her own mind, let it be applied to herself, she wrote:

"He may have been either right or wrong in his opinions; his speculation as philosopher, as religionist, as social reformer, are justly open to approval, to criticism, to reprobation; each individual has a right to form his own opinion on the work; but the worker himself should be reverently spoken of, and should be criticized without malice and prejudice...... His tender heart, his earnest and disinterested labour, his laborious and self-sacrificing life, his pure and noble character -- these are his titles to the admiration and homage of the Humanity he loved so well. Surely the race whose dignity he laboured to raise, whose toil he strove to cheer, whose woes he sought to lighten, should at least read him before they condemn. Some generous attention is due at least to him, who might have raised himself to power and affluence if he had turned his mighty talent to his own ends, but who chose instead, to dedicate every power to serve man-kind, and who took as the motto of his life, "Vivre pour autrui".1