Chapter V
Besant -- The Leader of Women's Cause
BESANT - THE LEADER OF WOMEN'S CAUSE

Annie Besant's role as an outstanding leader of woman’s cause in India also needs to be analysed and highlighted because it was vitally connected with her cherished goal of securing India's freedom. The spectacular growth of a feeling of oneness and national unity in the twentieth century was reflected in the Indian women's movement also. In this context Margaret Cousin has remarked:

The emergence of a consciously fostered unity of Indian womanhood began from about 1914 when Dr. Annie Besant entered politics and delivered a memorable series of public lectures in Madras entitled 'Wake-up, India'. These resonated throughout India in a clarion call to the people to work out their own salvation by freeing their girls from illiteracy and child marriage, by freeing their outcastes (since renamed Harijans by Gandhiji) from all religious and social degradation, and by freeing the whole nation from foreign domination. 1

A wave of fresh enthusiasm then swept over the country for political freedom and from the beginning it was linked with a realisation that it should be freedom for women as well as for men.

Freedom of women is even more important for the healthy
growth of a nation as - "A nation never rises permanently above
the level of its women," so correctly observed C.Despard. How
true this statement is for we cannot have a strong, wise and
noble race, capable of self-government, on one hand, and of
reverence for beauty and greatness on the other - a nation able
to receive and follow practically the teaching of the wise ones,
until we have a true, strong, well developed and finely
educated generation of women.

One often wonders as to why did Annie Besant raise her
voice for the emancipation of women in India? Much credit for preparing Annie Besant to take this initiative
towards women’s emancipation goes to Theosophical Society, which
believed in universal brotherhood not theoretically alone but
practically too. The first main object of the society is "to
form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood without distinction
of race, creed, sex, caste or colour." There are three
fundamental Theosophical doctrines: Brotherhood, Reincarnation
and Karma. Mrs. Besant felt that these doctrines, applied to the
social organisation, would provide a foundation on which to
build, would show us the method whereby society would be
administered and character gradually improved. Elaborating her

2. C.Despard, Theosophy and the Women’s Movement (London,
1913), p.5.
3. Ibid., p.7.
stand, she said that Brotherhood provided the foundation, Reincarnation the guiding principles in organisation and *Karma* the law of cause and effect.

Moreover, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, consciousness of women potential and of their plight continued to grow in Europe. She was already familiar with the struggle for women’s suffrage campaign before coming to India and while, visiting Britain in 1910, participated in a women’s suffrage parade with other Theosophist feminists namely, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarjadasa. After returning to India, she urged women to participate in national life. Thus both these factors had prepared her for raising her voice for the emancipation of women.

Incessantly through her lectures, speeches and writings, Annie Besant reminded the Indian women of their glorious past and claimed that these ideals had inspired the women’s movement. She argued that Indian women nursed on their ancient literature and its wonderful ideals of womanly perfection could not remain indifferent to the great movement for India’s liberation. Thus, Annie Besant utilised the revivalist concept of ‘a golden age’ in order to legitimize the participation of women in public life in the twentieth century.
Besant’s Views about Women’s Position in the Past

It is rather instructive to study the rise and decline of the position of women in India and the role of Mrs. Besant in helping her to recapture their lost position and glory. In the ancient times women rose to great heights in every field. In the Vedic age the birth of a daughter was regarded auspicious and the pursual of Epic proves that girls “Sita, Kunti, Shakuntala were adopted” and great affection and love was showered on them. In ceremonies – such as coronation – their presence was considered auspicious. Education and military education was imparted to girls belonging to the royalty. Character building was regarded as an essential part of education. Girls were well versed in music and dancing. In the absence of academic or institutional education, most of the education was imparted at home. Around 100 A.D. child marriage was favoured and this proved disastrous for girls as an ignorant wife was no longer the partner of her educated husband but her status was reduced to that of a disciple and devotee. (Sati was uncommon and widow

5. The reasons, put forth in its favour were, the idea of chastity, disappearance of intellectual education and to check women from joining nunneries, intercaste and love marriages.
remarriage too was rare). The position of women in India gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade away with the passage of time.

During the period of the Smritis - the period of codification of social laws - women were bracketed with the Sudras, and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. 6

With the passages of time and due to the influx of foreigners and invaders, there was a steep fall in the social and religious status of women. A.C. Das rightly remarked:

Womanhood was sacrificed at the altar of supposed social convenience and purity and out of its ashes rose a race of crippled, cabined, confined and delicate creatures, too fragile for the propagation of vigorous life and too ethereal and womanly to be of any earthly use. 7

Education was denied to women and the practice of early marriages gained ground. The strong woman gradually became dependent on men and were ill-treated by them. However, the Marxist view on the deterioration of the position of women is different. It is based on Engel's argument that women's oppression

started with the emergence of private property and hence with
capitalist class relations the struggle for a classless society
logically subsumes the struggle for women's emancipation. Thus
the separation of public and private spheres with the development
of industrial capitalism meant that women came increasingly to be
economically dependent on men. They were made to serve the needs
of capitalism by having and caring for children, thus, producing
the next generation of workers and reproducing the labour power
of their husbands. Women were, therefore increasingly excluded
from the labour market and did not produce surplus value; failing
to be classifiable as producer or exploiter of surplus value;
they thereby failed to have a class position of their own. The
main thrust of the Marxist argument, then is very much that the
subordinate position of women can be explained by the means and
relationships of production under capitalism. The application

Zaretsky E.V., *Capitalism, Family and Personal Life*

For further information on the view points of Marxist
feminist and Socialist feminist read D.E. Smith, 'A Sociology
for Women' in J.A. Sherman and E.T. Beck (ed.s), *The Prism of
Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Wisconsin, 1979);
D.E. Smith, 'Woman, Class and Family' in R. Miliband and

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of the Marxist criteria for analysing the social position of Indian women has not yet been adequately made by the scholars.

**Campaign for Women’s Organisation**

The movement to reform customs detrimental to women’s status was begun by men. Moved by the deplorable condition of women, the nineteenth century social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chander Sen, Justice Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekanand took up the cause of women to abolish the oppressive social customs. They thus trained the first generation of women leaders.

Let us now turn to South, where Mrs.Besant initiated her crusade for the upliftment of women. In the south, during the 1850’s, debates over social and religious customs began to appear among the small, educated Hindu class. It led to the formation of organisations to propagate the women cause. In November 1852, Srinavas Pillay, an educated Hindu who advocated social reform, organised the **Hindu Progressive Improvement Society**. This Society advocated women’s education, the betterment of the depressed classes and widow remarriage. After his death the leadership of the Society passed on to Venkataroyhu Naidu, another advocate of reforms. He led the organisation and founded schools for children of depressed caste, provided scholarships to
the needy, fought for Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, organized a Hindu reading, and the Hindu Debating Society in Madras City. There was, however, little acceptance of his ideas and, when he died in 1863, many of his projects died with him.

By the 1860's knowledge of Brahma Samaj had reached southern India through Sridharalu Naidu. Under the influence of this ideology, in 1864 the Veda Samaj was founded at Madras City. The Veda Samaj promised to abstain from polygamy, attendance or patronage of nautch child marriage, and to campaign for widow remarriage. Branches of the Veda Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, and the Prarthana Samaj in South India depended on the one or two dynamic and energetic leaders. With their deaths, these organisations tended to fade.

The first organisations for women were begun by male reformers who belonged to the new religious reform societies.


11. In 1864 Keshab Chandra Sen's visit to Madras attracted the attention of the people but his outright rejection of idolatory went too far for Madras Hindus. A compromise resulted from Sen's visit that led to the founding of Veda Samaj at Madras City in 1864.
Keshab Chander Sen, a charismatic young Brahmo leader, had demonstrated his willingness to take a strong stand on the woman question when he took his young wife to the ceremony where he was accepted into the folds of Brahmo Samaj. He was ostracized by his family for encouraging his wife to shake off purdah. The first organisation for women was founded by him in 1865. Inspired by his initiative, a vast majority of women, who came from families in which men participated actively in social, religious or political associations came forward to form women organisations.

Earlier women's organisations - ladies clubs, women's associations, and Mahila Samities were the first to articulate the demands of women as a group. These early women's associations were numerous, and they varied greatly in size, aims and longevity. Some of them remained small local organisations for a number of years and simply died when their purpose was no longer relevant.

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century these small women's organisation began to sprout in various parts of India. In 1880's Pandita Ramabai founded the Arya Mahila Samaj and also set up a series of women's associations in various towns of Bombay Presidency.

Another category of women's organisations was the women's auxiliaries of general reform associations for example, Sakhi Samiti by Swarna Kumari Devi (1886), Gujarati Stri Mandal (1903), Bharat Mahila Parishad (1904), Bharat Stree Mahamandal (B.S.M) (1910) by Sarla Devi Choudhriani and a series of Mahila Samitis in Bengal started by Saroj Nalini Dutt in 1913.

In the Madras Presidency, an Indian Christian social reformer, Dr. Sattinadhan was encouraged by his wife Kamala to start Indian Ladies Magazine in 1901. Early activities by Indian Women in South India included a Brahmin widow home in 1913, founded by Subbalakshmi Ammal; and the Mahila Seva Samaj of Mysore in 1913. These associations had done the spade work for Annie Besant. As the Theosophical Society, with its praise of all things Hindu, had already made the south Indian intellectuals receptive to her new ideas and standards. It may be conceded that the Christian missionaries had earlier done some useful initial work in the sphere of women's education. In Madras the missionary domination of the educational system shaped educational politics in the 1880's and 1890's. Owing to


sustained missionary efforts for women's education, the organisational activity among Indian women was generally higher in southern than in northern India. This fact is supported by the table showing literacy percentage according to Census Report of India, 1891:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Female Literacy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mrs. Besant's view of Hinduism was deeply divided between its glorious past and a degenerate present. For her the one universal religion was theosophy. She linked this concept to a dualistic division of the world between the East and the West. The West had positive achievements in the freedom and respect given to women, in its emphasis on work, its organisational talents, and in its high level of material prosperity. She labelled the West as materialistic and contrasted it with a spiritual East by which she meant India and Hinduism. Sarla Devi Choudhrani has also acknowledged Indian women's debt to the West:

15. India, Census of 1891, vol.1, p.64, also cited in Jana Matson Everett, op.cit., p.32.
oriented towards elite representation and not towards mass mobilization but slowly and gradually it gained ground. After 1910, national and provincial associations were started by women who had acquired experience in local women's association. Mrs. Besant's personal experience of suffering and pain made her sensitive to the travails of human beings particularly women.

**Besant's Groundwork for Women's Emancipation**

The first step taken by Annie Besant to bring about the emancipation of women was to tackle the root cause i.e. illiteracy. To remove this 'iron curtain' of ignorance and illiteracy she used Education as the main instrument for enlightening the girls especially about their past history and also to "... train them in their own Sanskrit and vernacular literature which will make them proud of the past, which will make them realise the future towards which we are going". She pointed out that no question was of more vital importance to India than that of the education of girls. She elaborated this -

They make the atmosphere in which the young offshoots of the Nation's life develop, and give those early impressions which are never wholly eradicated. The culture of a Nation depends more on its women than on its men, for culture is very largely a question of atmosphere. The education of Indian girls must be in the hands of Indians, as Indians alone can so plan out an education of their daughters, that while they revive Gargi they shall not slay Shakti. 19

She wanted to revive old Indian ideals in education, but she was not blind to the hard realities of modern India. She was modest and reasonable when she said:

We cannot make the full change back to the old ideals at once, but I do trust that we may be able gradually to work towards the ancient ideal and this may set an example which all lovers of India will venture to follow. 20

Thus, she did not merely romanticize Indian ideals, customs and traditions, but saw their use, utility and relevance too. She felt that by educating the women and making them aware of the cruelties that were perpetrated upon them it would be possible to inculcate nationalistic feelings in them.

It may be conceded that Government of India had recognized the importance of women's education by making provisions for it in the Despatch on Education in 1854, but it was far from adequate. The Wood's Despatch observed, "Schools for females are

21 included among those to which grants in aid may be given, yet, their attention to this aspect was not very heartening. Scholarly analysis of the women's education show that female illiteracy was seen as an important problem of the nineteenth century urban educated elite in India. The reasons for its slow growth were many. Firstly, high caste Hindus would not allow their daughters to attend the Christian missionary girls schools as they feared attempts of conversion. Secondly, British government's encouragement for female education was minimal. Thirdly, shortage of female teachers added to the slow progress in this field. This is evident from the census Reports which recorded the low percentage of the increase of educated women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of literate women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. For more information see Aparna Basu, The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898-1929 (Delhi,1974); Jana Matson Everett, Women and Social Change in India (Delhi,1981), p.29.
Through Brahmo Samaj and other reform associations had opened schools for girls, but it was like a drop in the ocean. The increase in the number of women attending colleges, though slow came about after the establishment of Central Hindu School for girls in 1905 and many other such institutions were opened by various reformers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>6,782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>201,304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The increase in number of females attending colleges rose markedly after 1898 when Mrs. Besant, through her speeches and by opening educational institutions, brought about awareness among the people and installed a new courage in the hearts of the women to liberate themselves from the age-old superstitions.

Mrs. Besant was against the evil custom of child marriage, with a view to eradicating this evil she discouraged the admission of married students to the Hindu College. Regarding the education of girls she said:

You cannot keep the daughters out of consideration. Until the girls are also educated... trained, until they know the glory of the past and teach it to their children on their knee, until you restore the ancient institute of Brahmacharya which forbade students to enter into married life, until the student life was over... until these things are done in India, India must remain weak as she is today.25

In her lecture 'Wake up, India' she said:

The future of India depends on the abolition of child marriage, amongst the people, that as long as that persists, there are certain inevitable consequences, of lowered vitality, of the speed of nervous diseases, of premature age, all of which you can see going in India of today standing in the way of her taking her place among the physically stronger nations of the world.26

Stressing on the need for women to participate in national development she said that India's daughters must come out from their seclusion and take back their place in the common life, in order to enable their country to march forward. Annie Besant's magic lay in her speeches because as she talked she appealed to both intellect and heart. Her extraordinary learning was already well extended into the realm of Hindu theology. She had such power of exposition, such human warmth of appeal, such a gracious effect of beauty.27

Mrs. Macdonald, wife of Ramsay Macdonald, who visited India during this period when Annie Besant was awakening the masses observed that there was a "tremendous movement going on amongst

25. Cited from Yudhistira Kumar, Annie Besant as an Indian Educator (Gwalior, n.d), p.11.
women. We are fond of labelling the Indian inspiration as sedition when if they were amongst ourselves we should call them patriotic.

Annie Besant’s national education, as already explained in Chapter IV, became the slogan of the nationalist women who had begun to participate in the deliberations of the Indian National Congress. They took up the responsibility to share the national efforts through the press and the platform. At this time Mrs. Besant made her presence felt by creating a lot of awareness among women in the field of politics so much so that women outside India also were inspired to further the national cause. Madam Cama after the conference in Germany left for America, where she launched vigorous campaign to win the sympathy of the people for that sacred cause. She told the pressmen boldly that Swaraj and Self-government were her goals. She addressed meetings at several places and started a well-known monthly journal, The Bande Matram. Through this revolutionary journal she enlightened the public abroad.

Formation and Expansion of Women’s Organisation

On 8 May 1917 with the energetic efforts of Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarjudasa, both Theosophists, Annie Besant founded the Women’s Indian Association (W.I.A.) in Madras which worked

in education industry, politics as well as in other areas.

The W.I.A proposed to operate on all India basis by
including as members all types of women residents of India and to
bind them together for mutual service.

The main objects of the W.I.A were:
1. To present to women their responsibilities as daughters of
   India.
2. To secure for every girl or boy the right of education
   through schemes of compulsory primary education, including
   the teaching of religion.
3. To secure the abolition of child marriage and to raise the
   age of consent of married girls to sixteen years.
4. To secure for women the vote for Municipal and Legislative
   Councils on the same terms as it is or may be granted to
   men.
5. To secure for women the right to be elected as members on
   all Municipal and Legislative Councils.
6. To help women to realise that the future of India lies
   largely in their hands for as wives and mothers they have
   the task of training, guiding and forming the character of
   the future rulers of India.

7. To band women into groups for the purpose of self-
   development and education, and for the definite service of
   other.29

The W.I.A. had fifty one branches and eighteen centres, with
a membership of 2,7000. Two of its members became the first
women to be admitted to the Indian Bar. Six had been appointed to
Municipal Councils, three as Honorary Bench Magistrates. Out of

the total of three Presidency Magistrates, two appointed were women for the first Children's Court in Madras. The Association had whole-heartedly engaged in social-service, and had shared much of the responsibility of the 'National Baby Week' in different places. This task was taken up by the *Women's Home of Service* in Madras which was one of its beneficient institutions. There was an attendance of 20,000 infants and children at its Baby Welcome Centres, 150 pupils were taught handicrafts at its training schools. Even classes in Sanskrit and English were also held. The *H.I.A.* has started child and maternity welfare activities in the early 1920's.

The *H.I.A.* soon became a powerful organisation and the social and educational reforms it effected were very important. *H.I.A.* was known throughout India as the largest women's organisation. By the formation of *H.I.A.*, Annie Besant gave a formal organisational structure for women's movement and educating women in liberal ideas.
Margaret Cousins (affectionately known as Gretta) and Annie Besant both played a vital role in educating Indian women in liberal ideas. From 1906 to 1913 Gretta had worked in Ireland to strengthen the Irish Women's Franchise League, which she founded; she was also involved in the Suffragate movement in England and was imprisoned for her activities. She, along with her husband, came to India in November 1915 to join and help Annie Besant in her work for awakening India. Both the Irish ladies dedicated the best years of their lives in bringing about a renaissance and launching Women's movement with a full belief in the power of Indian womanhood though at that time it was completely submerged in the four walls of the house. In this work, they were joined by a few Indian women who championed the cause of their own sex.

Emergence of Indian Women's Movement

How did these movements emerge? There are various views which throw great light on the emergence of women's movement. Some hold the view that the Manusmriti concept of woman contributed indirectly to the formation of an Indian women's
movement. The social practices of early marriage and harsh treatment of widows galvanized some nineteenth century educated elites to focus many of their reform activities on women.

Second view is that the institution of purdah had several implications for the development of women. It was indirectly helpful in developing women's movement as it gave the women in purdah an opportunity to join an organization separate from men and participate in activities to improve their condition. The important norm of sex role complementarily in Indian culture was enforced both through Hindu values and through the social institution of purdah. The ideological implications of purdah would tend to shape the goals of early women's movement leaders towards corporate ideals (improving women's performance of traditional female roles) and away from liberal ideals (achieving identical rights for men and women).

However, the efforts of the social reformers established some pre-conditions necessary for the development of the Indian women's movement; schools for women were started; members of social reform groups, such as the Brahma Samaj, married late so that women from these groups were able to get education; and

members of these groups were tended to be supportive of associational activities of women. The Arya Nari Samaj, revivalist in spirit promoted Hindu ideals of womanhood, Bangla Mahila Samaj promoted modern ideals for women through encouraging the interaction between men and women; Sakhi Samiti propagated the ideals of the ancient civilization of Indian service and self-help. Towards late 19th century the issue of women's status became entangled with intra-elite competition. M.G. Ranade's National Social Conference (N.S.C) formed in 1887, provided an all India forum for discussion of social reforms. Further the Bharat Mahila Parishad (B.M.P) organized educational and inspirational programmes for women. These organisations helped in promoting women movements. The major achievement of this phase was the formation of M.I.A in 1917 by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarjadasa and Margaret Cousins.

The participants in the Women's Movement may be categorised as: (1) Missionaries (2) Wives of the British officials (3) Non-conformist western women actively involved in the Indian Nationalist Movement (4) A tiny sector of urban educated women and (5) Wives and relatives of social reformers.

Though Annie Besant belonged to the third category, she charted an independent course for herself and in fact, the entire initiative of Indian women's movement passed into her hands in 1917.

Generally speaking, the leadership of the women's movement emerged from the urban, English educated middle class. They were feminists who usually had pursued professional careers, and had frequently been active in the suffrage campaign which was the most prominent aspect of an expanding women's movement that sought equality for women under the law. These individuals were neither associated with missionary nor with official network in India. They either became attached to Indian-based groups and leaders or worked as independent agents to fight for the rights of women. Their experience colored their evaluation of campaigns for franchise. They were also useful in urging and supporting Indian women to become active on women issues in the international sphere. Thus the reforms, legislations and experiments with new roles for women, introduced throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, can be described as the women's movement.

How did Annie Besant enlighten the British women about the Indian women's movement and enlist their support? makes quite an interesting study. Through her paper United India,
Annie Besant enlightened the British public about India. In collaboration with her associates she conducted a campaign to educate British public opinion on the need of such reforms. For example, Dorothy Jinajadasa’s London committee, a London Branch of W.I.A was formed in 1928 to establish regular contacts with women groups in England and inform them of the aspirations of India and its women.

Mrs. Besant found dedicated workers like Mrs. Francesca Arundale, Miss Noble, Miss Emery, Miss Bargle and many others and requested them to come to India to help in the cause of Women’s education as there were not enough Indian Women available at that time. The instructions which she gave to each one of these workers, were that they were to identify themselves with India and her aspirations; that they should not only organise and teach but fathom the depths of India’s Religion and Culture. These workers imbibed from her the spirit of humility. In 1928, the W.I.A decided to establish regular contact with women organisations in Britain. Dorothy Jinajadasa organised a London committee of W.I.A to gain public support. British feminists like Margaret Sanger and representatives of women organisations like Agatha Harrison, frequently attended the annual sessions of the A.I.W.C and W.I.A. From 1924, a small sum of money was

33. History of Women’s Indian Association 1917 to 1967, p. 35.
regularly contributed by the International Women's Alliance to the W.I.A to help them with such expenses as propaganda and election campaign.

In this way, women activities of one country evoked the interest of women in other countries and they offered help for securing their rights and privileges. That was how the women's movement spread from the West to the East to revolt and act. Thus the women became a force and a power in their respective lands. Hirabai A.Tata wrote that Annie Besant arranged at Harrogate a public meeting for Indian women's movement leaders to awaken public interest in the women question. She introduced the Indian representatives to many of the Suffrage Societies as she felt, it was "necessary to educate the average British elector, man and woman, about the women of India to dispel certain wrong ideas". Hence it was necessary to tour around U.K. and speak at different places. Whenever she spoke on Indian Home Rule or other allied subjects many times at different places, she usually devoted a part of her lecture to the question of women's franchise and asked the help of British electorate to help Indian women. It was at her request that 'Votes for Indian Women', by

34. One who known, Mrs. Margaret Cousins and Her Work in India (Madras, 1956), pp.41-54.
35. Stri Dharma, p.625.
the Women's Freedom League, as well as a second meeting was organised by the Women's International League.

In Indian, the first challenge faced by the W.I.A in the political sphere was on the question of women's right to vote. The women's first delegation consisting of four Europeans appeared before Montague on December 13, 1917. It was led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, and it pleaded for women's franchise and health. This undoubtedly was a very bold and daring demand.

The deputation was sympathetically received but no action was taken. Britain appointed the Southborough Committee to investigate the demands put forth by the women. The Southborough Committee, after making a detailed study, declared in 1919 that it was not practical to open the franchise for women. The hopes of Indian women were dashed. The Government of India Bill legislated in 1919, (known as Montagu Chelmsford Reform) did not enfranchise women. However, the women persisted in their efforts to get voting rights for women. So for this purpose in 1919 a


The prominent members of the delegation were Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarjadasa, Margaret Cousins, Dr. Joshi (Later Rani Rajwade), Hirabai Tata, Begum Hasrat Mohani.
special delegation comprising of Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Hirabai Tata and Mithan Tata went to London to give evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the Government of India Bill. During their extended stay in London, these women through newspapers and meetings campaigned for their demand and succeeded in creating a climate of sympathy. Back home, the WIA in Madras and a few women's organisations in Bombay had been demanding franchise for women. The first success came when the JPC recommended the removal of sex qualification. Many of the Provinces immediately introduced resolutions to franchise women. The resolutions were passed in Madras in 1920, Bombay in 1921, United Provinces in 1923, Central Provinces, Bengal and Punjab in 1927. Through the influence of women's organisation, Muthulakshmi Reddi, "was nominated to Madras Legislative Council, whom the council unanimously elected to be its Deputy Speaker". However the battle for women's franchise had not concluded.

The W.I.A also worked zealously for reinvigorating Indian movement. For its success, many hands joined together. In this context, Stri Dharma made special reference to the prominent

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39. Stri Dharma, *op.cit.*
women activists:

... the late Highness, the Dowager Maharani of Mysore, who raised the status of Womanhood of her state, the Late Sultan Begum of Bhopal, their Highness the Senior and Junior Maharani of Travancore, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi and Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya.40 all these stalwarts steered the course of women organisations at various stages gallantly. Earlier Bharat Stri Mahamandal 41 (1901) had tried to promote women's movements. It failed to be a mass organisation as its activities centred around northern India and Bengal. Moreover, there was a lacuna in its organisation as there was no central office or centralized fund raising machinery and also it adopted the practice, followed by the nineteenth century women associations, of inviting Indian women of nobility and wives of British officials. The W.I.A on the other hand, had clear cut aims and objectives and also an organ Stri Dharma, a monthly magazine, to propagate its aims and ideology.

Thus step by step and year by year with the unrelenting work put in by thousands of volunteers the women's movement moved

41. The first All India Women's Organisation, the Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1901), was started by Saraladevi Chaudhriani, the brilliant daughter of Swarnkumari Devi. However this venture was short lived.
forward gathering momentum sometimes responding to the global and
at times Indian development and at times helping to mould those
events.

As time passed, the need was felt for an All India body of
women which could give an organisational push to the growing
feelings amongst the women. Prior to this, there were a number
of small bodies either in districts or in cities, but not linked
up with any large organisation. Here again, Mrs. Besant was the
main inspiration and through her lieutenants and colleagues she
initiated the task of organising All India Women’s Conference
(A.I.W.C) in October 1927. The original objects of the A.I.W.C
was to promote the education of women but in 1929 it was resolved
that social reform should also be included in its work.

42 Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, Women’s Struggle (Delhi, 1990)
Appendix (i), p.149. Aims and objectives of A.I.W.C were 1.
To work for a society based on the principles of social
justice, integrity, equal rights and opportunities for all.
(ii) To secure recognition for the inherent rights of every
human being. (iii) To support the claim of every citizen to
the right to enjoy basic civil rights and liberties. (iv) To
stand against all separatist tendencies and to promote
greater national integration and unity (v) To work actively
for general progress and welfare of women and children and to
help women to utilise to the fullest the Fundamental rights
conferred on them by the constitution of India. (vi) To co­
operate with people and organisations of the world for the
implementation of these principles which alone can assure
permanent international amity and world peace.
The A.I.W.C has been instrumental in starting the All India Educational Fund Association under whose aegis a Cultural Training College for women in Delhi was opened.

The A.I.W.C took the work load of W.I.A. for gaining recognition for women's political rights specially the right of voting for women. The Franchise Committee of the Round Table Conference toured India to assess the country's need for new reforms. The Committee recommended, besides the existing qualifications of age and property, three more qualifications for enfranchising women.

A wife of a man who had property qualification and was over 25 years of age was qualified to vote. Secondly, a widow over 25 years of age was qualified to vote, if her husband was franchised at the time of his death. Graduates over twenty one years of age also could vote.43

As such qualifications did not recognise women's independent right to suffrage. Hence a memorandum was drafted in April, 1931 by the representatives of A.I.W.C, W.I.A and National Council of Women in India (N.C.W.I.) asking for equal rights and

44. Aparna Basu Bharati Ray, op.cit., p.56. NCWI was founded by Lady Tata and Lady Aberdeen in 1925, and was the Indian branch of the International Council of Women. The A.I.W.C in 1931 organised a meeting of women representatives at Bombay in conjunction with N.C.W.I to prepare a memorandum to be submitted to the franchise committee of the Second Round Table Conference.
opportunities for women protesting that:

We look upon nomination, reservation of seats and cooperation in any sphere of activity as pernicious and humiliating, it may even tend to create spirit of communalism amongst women which we at any rate are determined shall not be the case.45

Later, known as Memorandum I, demanded universal adult suffrage, mixed general electorates and no reservations, nominations or co-options.

In March 1933, Memorandum II was submitted to the Joint Select Committee of the Parliament. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddi and Mrs. Sheefat Hamid Ali. The Government of India Act 1935 recommended:

Women over twenty-one years of age could vote provided they fulfilled one of the following requirements: they were literate, property owners, or wives or widows of men having property.46

By this Act 6 million women were enfranchised. Thus the participation and involvement of women struggle for voting rights or women had made them aware and conscious of political issues and helped in preparing the country for women political leaders.

45. Report of the All India Women’s Conference 1933-34, p.182.
As early as 1917 Margaret Cousins regarded this movement for political citizenship as an evidence of the existence of the consciousness in women as well as men of 'India as a Nation.'

This, marked a distinct phase in the story of 'India’s emergent womanhood.'

Evidently, the India women’s movement had already passed through its first phase (1917-28) which had dealt with prominent issues of female enfranchisement and their eligibility for the legislature. In its second phase (1928-33), the major issues were the terms of enfranchisement and increasing female representation in legislatures were taken up by the A.I.W.C. Mrs. Besant, who had been actively associated, was now no longer actively involved in struggle for women’s enfranchisement under the leadership of A.I.W.C, reiterated her view that women were born to create and not to destroy and it should not be forgotten that in the nation-building process women have been playing a great and glorious part as citizens, wives and mothers.

49. Presidential Address of Dr. S.Muthulakshmi Reddi (Madras, 1931), p.34.
The Indian women's movement is one of the most successful feminist movements. Surprisingly, it achieved some objectives more quickly and with less opposition than the women's movement in Britain and the United States. Though small in size and elitist in composition, it was extremely helpful in urging the women to further their causes. Furthermore, English education acquired by the elite taught that social practices should be based on reason instead of tradition.

Did the issue 'female emancipation' disappear from the agenda in the late 19th and 20th century? It seemed that female emancipation had disappeared giving place to nationalist agitation but it was not so. Rather the reason lies in the refusal of national leaders to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. The new politics of India glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional rather than aping the West. That was why A.I.W.C speeches during 1927-31 presented its goal of women's uplift whereas during 1932-51 it presented equal rights as the main goal. Thus the ideology changed from a corporate to a liberal feminist orientation in the 1930's. The dramatic emergence of women during the anti-colonial struggle indicated that they had overcome the limitations placed on their role in.
the political life of the country. The attempts of social
reformers in the 19th century to interpret and define women's
role in the family and community had been extended by nationalist
leadership to include politics.

However, participation in politics did not change the ideals
of Hindu womanhood. The role of a wife and mother continued to
be revered and idealized. Their participation in politics
accentuated the spirit of liberalism and egalitarianism which was
evident during the nationalist struggle. Indian women
increasingly felt assured that they could use the social,
economic and political affairs of the country.

Did she give a new vision and direction to Indian women's
position? Yes! she made a creative use of India's cultural
traditions, sanctioned equality among men and women, and this
sentiment had been largely responsible for the enlightened and
liberal attitude of Indians towards the women's movement. The

50. Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's
Question', Occasional Paper no. 94, Centre for Studies in
Social Sciences, Calcutta.
women's movements were not a revolt against a male-dominated society but an assertion of the rights of women. The involvement of women in politics and the support and cooperation they had received from their male colleagues were presented as evidence of the spiritual and moral superiority of Indian culture. This positive facet of Indian culture was in direct contrast to the negative western image of the Indian women in Indian society itself i.e. oppressed, backward and tradition-bound. In their attempt to counteract such criticism, the nationalist leaders had loudly applauded the achievements of women in politics, education and social reform. There was, of course, an obvious tendency to romanticize the past.

At the time, when India's rightful aspirations were being thwarted by the ruling class on every side, and when Indians had lost all faith in constitutional agitation, Annie Besant proclaimed her sincere conviction that:

Britain could still be induced to be true to her noble tradition of freedom and fair play, if only Indians were mild but insistent on their lawful demands. . . . The wives of a Nation give courage to their husbands, the mothers of a Nation train the generation that will inherit our work in

freedom, in self-respect, in nobility or character. No bird can fly with one wing; no Nation can rise with only one sex taking part in the National life.52

Thus, through theosophy and education Mrs. Besant brought women into politics. She was the first lady who hoisted the banner of women’s struggle for emancipation by giving it a formal shape in the form of W.I.A. In the first two decades of this century, a sound foundation for women’s increasing participation in public life was laid. Compared to the overall consciousness of Indians to free their country, few women could actively participate in the movement because of their customary restrictions, mass enforced widowhood, purdah, polygamy and dowry. There was a considerable change in the thinking, outlook and values of Hindu women who suffered from these social abuses. The struggle for India’s freedom entered a new phase after the First World War and the fast growing new awakening in the land gave rise to some important new ideas, bringing into its fold women and providing it a much broader base. Subsequently, these developments would bring a change in their attitude towards society which created a milieu for emancipation among Hindu women. Hence, Indian women had gradually moved towards a goal of self-reliance.

52. New India, vol.59, no.221, 27 September 1917, p.3.
At this point it is worth while to differentiate between her earlier conceptualization as an activist in Britain and as a political leader in India. Mrs. Besant largely played an undocumented role in shaping feminism in India for she came to India when political, cultural and economic imperialism of the British empire was most uninhibited and she observed its effects on Indian society and the place of women in it. It may be mentioned that owing to her past experience of economic insecurity and cultural marginality of women under patriarchy, she rebelled against it and resigned her place in the patriarchal institutions that she saw as compromising or corrupt. In England she had spoken and fought relentlessly against patriarchy. However, as a champion of women causes in India she frequently lashed at social institutions for women’s oppression but she never directly targeted at men as patriarch’s. There could be many explanations for this change in Annie Besant’s approach. Perhaps, she regarded feminist’s aggressiveness in the prevailing conditions as counter productive for her fast rising popularity as a political leader in a patriarchal society.

Realizing the difference between the social conditions in England and India it was not pragmatic in her view to highlight this issue. She feared she might antagonise those Indians who were in favour of reducing the hold of social tyranny over women and their partial liberation.

In the end it may be said that the female awakening brought about by Annie Besant helped Indian women to gain self-confidence. Thus the political awakening of Indian women may largely be attributed to Annie Besant and the general improvement in the status of women in India owes a great deal to the infinite interest that she took from the very beginning. A band of
emancipated and dedicated women emerged under her influence. The national movement was for her not a political struggle alone, it was also a means for regenerating society.

In the next chapter we shall discuss how Mrs. Besant used to educate the people on various issues of socio-religious and political relevance for India.