Chapter VI
Annie Besant -- The Journalist
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ANNIE BESANT - THE JOURNALIST

Annie Besant is mainly remembered as the greatest woman thinker and journalist of the twentieth century. She was radically different from the other journalists of her times as she made a sincere effort to understand the ancient religions, in particular Hinduism, and explained in clarity the traditional values through lectures and writings.

In her writings she displayed a passionate love for India which she had transformed into a unique zeal, sincerity and determination for its regeneration. She has to her credit one hundred and five pre-theosophical books, six biographical and autobiographical books, two hundred and eighteen books on theosophy and thirty two on religion. She was a versatile and prolific writer and speaker who delivered about sixty nine lectures and articles on Indian culture, education, social reforms and religion. Pertaining to Indian politics she wrote ninety four books and pamphlets.

151
Her famous book *Make Up India A plea for Social Reform* was published in 1913. This book containing a remarkable series of lectures given by Mrs. Besant in Madras, in the later part of 1913, was well received by the educated people all over India. The themes discussed in the book were 'Foreign Travel'; 'Child Marriage and its Results'; 'Our Duty to the Depressed Classes'; 'Indian Industries as Related to Self-Government'; 'Mass Education'; 'The Education of Indian Girls'; and 'The Passing of the Caste System'. This book aroused great public interest.

In her second major book *How India Wrought for Freedom* (1915), Mrs. Besant has fearlessly pleaded the case for India's fitness for Home Rule before the public. In the foreword to the book she wrote:

> The grasp of the questions deal with, the sagacity of the remedies proposed for poverty and misrule, the sobriety of the claims urged, the knowledge of, and the sympathy with, the sorrows of the people, prove how much better off India would be under self-rule than under other rule.²

Both these books became so popular with the educated people that the British Government in India were afraid of the storm which Mrs. Besant's book under reference had caused. The police officers intimidated people so as to prevent them from buying and possessing Annie Besant's book.

In this regard Mrs. Besant wrote:

They go to people's houses and ask them if they have copies of either of these books. As both book's are circulating largely outside India these underground attempts to terrorise will help to show people in other countries the amount of liberty we enjoy in India. 3

Why did a successful writer like Annie Besant turn to full time journalism? Mrs. Annie Besant was initiated into journalism, as early as 1874, under the influence of Charles Bradlaugh, a Freethinker. Gradually, Mrs Besant became a regular contributor to his paper The National Reformer. While writing stories and articles casually she found the power of her pen which served her well as a future journalist. For example, in the year 1868, she wrote stories in the Family Herald a newspaper and earned thirty shillings for a story. This experience matured her as a writer. She also serialised The Lives of Black Letter Saints.

During this period, her personal tragedies - divorce and separation from her children - indirectly turned her mind towards constructive work and creative writing. As a result of her

3. *New India*, 13 March 1916, 'Indian Politics'.
traumatic experiences, she resolved to study and became a socialist, and to fight for the cause of the poor. So deep was the desire for the welfare of the masses imbedded in her heart that she raised her voice in 1879 against the girls working in deplorable conditions in the factories of England. She was against injustice and cruelty of every kind and these formed the themes of her writings as a journalist in later years.

In the early stages of her career as a journalist, Annie Besant and W.T. Stead, an English journalist, worked together for a small weekly which argued for higher wages for workers and wrote against cruelty to children and unjust landlords. Her experience of hunger and cruelty in life helped her to go deep into the cause and develop a keen insight into socio-economic problems.

Her meeting with Charles Bradlaugh turned out to be a decisive point in her growth as a journalist. He had helped her in honing her journalistic skills and in deepening her understanding of socio-economic, political and religious issues. When she joined the National Secular Society, her association with Charles Bradlaugh was further strengthened. This fact has
been corroborated by Annie Besant herself who remarked:

From that first meeting in the Hall of Science dated a friendship that lasted unbroken till death severed the earthly bond, and that to me stretches through death's gateway and links us together still.5

In the course of her long association with Bradlaugh she turned to Atheism which held out the hope for the improvement of the individuals:

Her Atheism was full of hope, for it showed the perfection of the race to be possible by the improvement of the individual and no personal reward ranked higher than the content of building a future for the race fairer than the present.6

What strengthened the friendship of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh in a firmer bond was their common interest in India as both wrote and spoke on agrarian reforms and how English imperialism upset the delicate balance of the Indian peasant economy. Both circulated a petition against granting a sum to the Prince of Wales to go to India.

So intense was her interest and love for India that in 1878 much before her arrival in India, she wrote a pamphlet-'England, India and Afghanistan' in which she traced the history of British conquest of India. She strongly condemned the conquest and subjugation of India by the British which was instrumental in bringing poverty and mis-rule to a highly superior civilization of the world.

6. Ibid.

155
Judging by her feeling for India at this stage, it is only by a stretch of imagination that one can find a link between these activities and her leadership of the Indian freedom movement. This was twenty one years ago before she came to India. Just as she sympathized with the Irish struggle for independence, in the same manner she felt unhappy about the foreign rule in India. But in the latter case, she graduated from sympathy to active participation in India’s struggle for throwing off imperialistic yoke. It was the year 1893 when she first kissed the Indian soil and the year 1913 marked her entry into both Indian politics and Indian journalism.

It is remarkable to note that she gave to India no fewer than forty years out of her eighty six. The years of childhood and pupilage being left out, it can be said that not less than two-third of her life’s work was done in India and for Indians. For Annie Besant, unlike her contemporaries journalism was a vital fragment of a larger life. There was no compartmentalization in her journalistic writings as one’s work acquired value only in the larger context of one’s work elsewhere and this was applicable to Mrs. Besant as well.

For a fair assessment of her journalistic work, three points should be borne in mind. Firstly there was the intimate and continuous interrelationship between her journalistic and political work. Her newspaper articles reflected the different phases of her political campaigning both within the Congress and outside, its ups and downs, its achievements and failures. Secondly, there was her theosophical background from which she derived her profound faith in India's high destiny and her conviction that India had a special mission to fulfill in the world. Last, but by no means the least relevant to an understanding of her political attitude in different situations was, her earlier career in England as a fighter against blind prejudice, bigotry and social injustice.

What greatly helped her in the field of journalism was her oratorical skills by which she used to keep her audience spell bound. Once on her feet, she felt perfectly at ease and was in her own language "ruler of the crowd". Already she possessed command over language. It was evident from her observation:

What joy there is in the full rush of language which moves and sways: to feel the crowd respond to the lightest touches; to see the faces brighten or graven at your bidding to know that the sources of human passion and human emotions gush at the word of the speaker as the stream from the river rock; to feel that the thought that thrills through a thousand hearers had its impulse from you and throbs back to you the fuller from a thousand heartbeats.10

In her view, the press provided a free platform for the expression of varied opinions on religious, educational, social and political problems, "so that burning questions in all parts of the world may be thrashed out and truth elicited by thoughtful discussion". This was the comment of one of her co-workers, C. Jinarjadasa.

The work which highlighted her most in the public eyes was her being the first woman proprietor and editor of a daily newspaper, *New India* if not in the whole of the world but at least in India. Her daily newspaper was started on 4 July 1914.

The motto of the paper was "For God, Crown and Country". This paper, which continued to be published for the next fifteen years, revolutionized Indian journalism. Writing to her friend

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12 *New India*, 1 August 1914, p.1.
Miss Esther Bright on 16 July 1914 she observed:

Please do not have a fit but I have bought a daily paper in Madras .... It is needed for the work. It was a rag, but it will be a power. It is the oldest paper in Madras (1841). It is quite exciting to edit a daily paper! I expect to make it good.13

Her demand for freedom found a voice in the powerful newspaper which she had edited since 1914, so writes C.A.Aggarwal. She also started a weekly newspaper *The Commonweal* on 2 January, 1914 "...to regenerate India". Mrs. Besant was the proprietor, editor and printer of *The Commonweal* and B.P.Wadia its publisher.

George Arundale, a co-worker of Mrs. Besant, observed that this journal was "specially intended for foreign consumption, as giving the real news about India, particularly to Britain". 17

16. Home Political (A) October 1916, File 36-53 and KW.
Besant's views on the Principles and Policies of Journalism

Annie Besant's views on the principles, functions and policy of a newspaper developed as she gained experience as an editor and as a commentator on Indian politics in which she actively participated. As a journalist her exacting standards and principles were admired by her contemporaries. For her, the newspaper was not just a money spinner; it was a sacred trust. That is why she did not allow advertisements in her paper. She "...tabooed objectionable advertisements in her paper. She was averse to sex oriented advertisements as also to advertising of foreign goods". She allowed no personal criticism of a person, nor attributed unworthy motives to an opponent with whom she was not in agreement.

It was through her writings she revealed her sincere conviction that India's spiritual knowledge would be of vital importance to the world's future. It was her belief that religious considerations should not influence the views of the Indian journalists who lived in a multi-religious and multi-lingual society. This explained her constant concern for Hindu Muslim unity, a vital problem for national unity. She repeatedly asserted:

There is no difference for us between Hindus and Musalmans, both are Indians; both come from the womb of Mother India.

18. P.N. Malhan, Communication Media Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (Delhi, 1985), p.43.
19. New India, 16 November 1917.

160
Annie Besant had definite views on the role to be performed by her daily newspaper *New India* in the national struggle for Home Rule. She specified its three-fold functions:

1. To understand popular feeling and to give expression to them.
2. To arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments.
3. To fearlessly expose popular defects.

She strongly advocated training in journalism especially for the new entrants in the nationalistic circle of newspapers. For this purpose she founded the National University at Adyar in Madras in 1920. In addition to the study of journalism as a subject, by the trainees, she imparted practical training to the students in the office of *New India* where she herself paid individual attention to various details.

Schooled by the trials and uncertainties of life, Annie Besant had developed a strong personality. She believed that the newspapers must follow the policy of honest expression of views without fear or favour. At a dinner party hosted by the Editor of

20. *The Hindu* – S. Kasturiranga Aiyangar, where editors of all

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magazine and papers of Madras were present, she said:

The duty of a newspaper is to try to form public opinion if it is not allowed to say what it thinks right ... I believe that boldness in the long run will answer as a safeguard if each one of us honestly and strongly express that which each one of us believes to be true and that is the way in which we can best serve our Motherland. If the Government is embarrassed by plain speaking it means the government is going wrong. After all Governments exist for the sake of the country and not countries for the sake of the Government... we should have deep sense of responsibility and remember that the written word is more powerful than spoken word. A spoken word may excite for the moment, but the effect of it passes away very much more quickly than the effect of a written words.21

Besant believed that the journalist should be a regular and alert student who should know well the history of the country, its economic conditions, the grievances which people have, the ways in which grievances might be redressed and should assume the role of the spokesmen of the people who otherwise remained inarticulate. Elaborating the points, she wrote:

We should try to make our voices heard in order that the lives of the inarticulate masses may be made less miserable than they are today. We can try and change the state of things affecting fifty or sixty million who are living on a single meal a day, and make them feel that we are one with them.22

21. New India, 18 October 1915. (Emphasis is mine).
22. Ibid.
Education and journalism are inseparable as benefits of education cannot be brought to light without the aid of journalism. It was through her writings that she intended to serve Indian social reform movement and sought to draw together men and women of goodwill in every land. She always said, "It is better to try nobly and to fail, than ignobly not to try at all".

Her clarion call seems to have inspired her contemporary journalists so much so that the moderate Hindi Journals Saraswati edited by Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi (the moderate turned Home Ruler), English organs like Modern Review, Hindustan Review, Indian Review, active Home Rule organs like Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi’s Pratap, Madan Mohan Malaviya’s Maryada, Jamnadas Dwarkadas’s Young India, Maharatta, and Arya Samaj’s Theosophist, p. 64.

23. Kanji Dwarkadasa, India’s Fight for Freedom (Bombay, 1966), p. 28. It is interesting to know that Gandhi’s paper Young India (later known as Harijan in November 1915), was first started as a weekly by Jamnadas, Umar Sorbani and Shankerlal Banker. Jamnadas Dwarkadas and K.M. Munshi were the first editors. The paper was to support Mrs. Besant’s policy. The paper continued till July 1919, Munshi having resigned his joint editorship after some months owing to difference of opinion with Shankerlal Banker. Jamnadas went to England with the Home Rule League delegation and Shankerlal and Umar Sobani handed over the paper to Gandhiji.
Saddharam Pracharak all wrote and preached in Annie Besant's style and tradition.

The vernacular press followed the lead given by the English language newspapers in propagating the message of Home-Rule. The lead was given by Annie Besant's New India published from Madras. It was taken up in Western India by Kesari of Tilak, Tribune in North, Leader in the United Provinces, Searchlight in Bihar, Amrit Bazar Patrika in Bengal. It is true that Home Rule movement was a mass movement which was launched by newspapers and agitation was kept up through the entire nationalist press. All the newspapers played a significant role in maintaining the momentum of the agitation by writing articles promoting the message of Home Rule. Margarita Barns rightly remarked that "All these were popular nationalist daily newspapers". Most Indian papers supported her cause but the Anglo-Indian press began to demand that she be asked to discontinue her activities. The Times of India (Bombay) was critical of her writings, The Englishman stated that her demands for swaraj was nonsense. The Indian Mirror (Calcutta), the Indian Patriot (Madras), the Hindu Prakash and The Gujrati

(Bombay) all opposed her ideas. But this kind of critical assessments for her writings did not dampen her enthusiasm, courage and strength. She felt that the British Government would take no action against those pro-British papers as they were always chanting its praises and projected to the public the views the Government wished them to take.

In view of the intensive propaganda for Home Rule through the columns of New India the British Government was determined to kill it. The Press Act of 1910 was enacted in order that a Government might kill any paper which criticised it and worked for change in a law-abiding way and which put forward arguments it could not controvert. Annie Besant anticipated its general implementation. The policy of the Government was simple. After suppressing New India, it would attack the remaining Indian papers in Madras excluding the Indian Patriot which sang paean in praise of the Government. The same modus operandi would be followed in Bombay, Central Province, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Only official papers would survive and then there would be no political discussion and "the earthworm will work undisturbed by plough or spade, and 'jo hukum' will be the rule of life.

27. Home Political (A) October 1916, File no. 36-53 and K.W., p.80; also in New India, 29 May 1916.
Internment

As Home Rule gathered momentum and made headway, it provoked the provincial Government to take stern steps. Unmoved by the attitude of the British Mrs. Besant carried on her work. She was served a notice demanding security of two thousand rupees on 26 May, 1916 when she was running temperature and was in bed. She was required to deposit the amount within fourteen days. The date of the notice i.e. 22 May 1916 was cleverly chosen because:

The Government knew that I had arranged to be in Poona on 21st to 22nd and 23rd May; it also knew, as it read all my telegrams, that I had an engagement impossible to break, on June 2, which compelled me to leave Madras on May 31st.28

This further gave her another opportunity to criticise the Government and she embarked upon a vigorous campaign against the Press Act which led to her security being forfeited. At the same time five thousand rupees as security was demanded from Vasant Press which was owned by Mrs. Besant. The New India was allowed

28. Home Department Political (A) Ibid., p. 78.
Annie Besant and the Strike Committee of the Matchgirls.

Mrs. Besant, reading 'New India', interned with B.P. Wadia and G.S. Arunadale.
to continue on enhanced security of ten thousand rupees. She filed a petition in the High Court under Section 17 of the Press Act 1910 to have the forfeiture set aside but the application was dismissed. The decision was challenged in different courts of law. Beginning with a special bench in the Madras Court, she fought on up to the Privy Council. Ultimately, she succeeded. Having failed to persuade Mrs Besant to suspend *New India*, the Government used other measures to restrain her activities. The Madras Government issued the order of internment on 16 June 1917 to Mrs Besant and her lieutenants Mr. G.S. Arundale, and Mr. B.P. Wadia.

According to Annie Besant the time of internment too was well-chosen as the Government was away in the hills, enjoying itself garden parties - no war 'economy' there - and the educated class is scattered, so that little effective protest can be made. Other parts of India may speak, but little can be done here in the summer holidays. Most of the patriotic leaders are away, and cannot be reached in the few days allowed.30

One of her contemporary Indian leaders Mr. C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar had postulated three possible theories about her internment:

It is perhaps the vehemence which she uses in her language. There are two ways always of persuasion. One deprecatory and apologetic in which a man is not sure that he believes in what he is saying. The other method is that which Mrs. Besant is using, the way of demand based on full belief and that is due to her traditions and her association with great men like Bradlaugh.31

The real and obvious reason as revealed by *New India*, was the "covetousness of the Bureaucracy which had been wielding unlimited power for over a century".32

Mrs. Besant's internment made her an even taller figure than she already was. During her internment Rabindra Nath Tagore sent a message "... that her martyrdom for the cause of suffering humanity will produce more good than any small favour that might have been thrown to us to silence our clamour". K.S. Ramachandra Rao, one of Besant's contemporaries, wrote to *New India* that what the Congress had failed to do in over a quarter of century, she was able to do for Home Rule Movement in six

31. *New India*, 13 June 1916, p.4, 'Madras and the Press Act'.
32. *New India*, 26 June 1917.
months, she gave a new lease of life to the Congress Movement. She considerably enriched the political literature of the country. In order to accelerate its tempo, he further writes that "She runs over the country from end to end as if with electric speed, holds public meetings, delivers lectures and thus help the political activities of the land."

The question which exercised the minds of her contemporaries was put forward in the article 'The Press Act Runs Amok' from The Kesari (Poona). In the letters to New India which stated that when both Congress and Annie Besant were preaching the same things then why was she interned and not the Congress leaders? Both had preached exactly the same either Home Rule or Swaraj? The reason why Government interned her was that they knew that the Congress will

...open its mouth and speak on Home Rule only for an hour or half-an-hour within a year, which the government knows, will not do it any harm. Mrs.Besant, being the proprietor of an excellent daily paper, will write out as much as the Congress can speak in two years on Home Rule in one day and give it to read in the hands of thousands of readers.36

34. New India, 8 June 1916, p.4, Letters to the Editor 'Bureaucracy in Excelsis'.
35. Ibid
36. New India, 8 June 1916.
As the First World War progressed, the Indian Press urged
the government to repeal the Press Act of 1910 as political
situation had grown critical. The Press Act of 1910, conceived in
a spirit of repression, had reduced the Indian Press from its
position as an independent critic of the Government to that of
a dependent institution. Within a short period of less than seven
years the British Government conducted a regular carnival of
Press prosecutions in which newspapers had been suppressed,
printing presses confiscated and their securities forfeited to
such an extent that it bewildered the public and alarmed the
journalists. Annie Besant was charged by the Madras Government
for printing seditious matter at her press. The Madras High Court
had found after investigations that there was nothing seditious
in her writings and her utterances had been moderate.

The people protested against the internment of Dr. Besant
through platform and Press. Their denunciations of these curbs on
the growth of a free Press in India reverberated throughout the
country. The Indian agitators asked their European and American
brethren to hold "meetings under the auspices of the
Theosophical Society - which are spread in every part." They

37. *New India*, 26 June 1917.
also implored Lord Pentland, who was a great statesman, to rectify the tactless blunder.

The internment of Mrs. Besant agitated the older generation including many Moderate leaders. The outcome of the internment was that she gained wide publicity and soon after her release, she was elected as the President of The Indian National Congress in 1917.

It is interesting to note the factors that prompted the British Government to release Mrs. Besant. Mrs. Besant and her lieutenants were released on 17 September 1917. Mrs. Besant had herself described the reasons for her release. She felt that crowds of people and important Congressmen like C.P. Ramaswami Aiyer, Jammadas Dwarkadas, fanned the storm and rode it. For three months the vehement agitation continued unbroken. Moreover, during this time, came the Declaration of 20 August 1917, which stated that the goal of Britain in India was 'Responsible Government'. In connection with this the Secretary of State for India, Mr. Montagu was visiting India to learn the wishes of the people. Thus to obtain a calm atmosphere the three internees were released.

Mrs. Besant's illness was another important consideration which compelled the British Government to release her. Referring to this G.S. Arundale has remarked:

The Government grew anxious as the reports of her health became more and more disturbing, and the Governor offered the services of his surgeon and a transfer to Coimbatore, a town with a more congenial climate. Her health however remained the same.39

Arundale also emphasized that the Government of India and the authorities in White Hall became still more nervous about the situation and must have wished the Madras Government had not committed so incredibly stupid a faux pas. And so the order of release was passed. Another important factor could be that the British Government did not want any kind of disturbance at the home front while they were engrossed in the First World War.

Themes of her Journalistic Writings

After her release she continued her career as an active journalist. During her internment P.K. Telang, her close associate, took over the editorship of New India. It re-appeared on 21 June after being in grave for 18, 19 and 20. She resumed her duties as editor of New India on 22 September 1917 but Mr. P.K. Telang remained to share the burden with her.

40. Ibid.
Discussion of themes in her journalistic writings is based on a close persual of *The Commonweal* (weekly) and *New India* (daily) edited by Annie Besant. *The Commonweal* was published by B.P. Wadia, her comrade. Its editorial notes on 'The Outlook' usually contained reference to, or summaries of, the principal articles, that have appeared in *New India* in the week. The paper also, from time to time, contained general articles, open to objection, on the score of anti-British or anti-Government prejudice.

After her release, she carried on her journalistic functions. Her writings focus on three broad themes i.e. political, educational and socio-religious.

**Political Issues**

A number of political issues such as Home Rule, Montagu Chelmsford Reforms, Rowlatt Bill and the boycott of Prince of Wales's visit to India occupied Mrs Besant's attention during the years 1916-1919. This was the busiest period for her paper as she electrified the atmosphere in India by her speeches and writings on Home Rule for India.

Gandhi's deep appreciation for her work was evident from his remark, "Home Rule became a mantram in every village" which

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works against the missionaries and the missionaries are the parasites patronised by the Government. Her press poured out "daily innumerable articles and pamphlets that fashion India to a new healthy national regeneration. All this was hated by the Government."

India's demand for Home Rule was her favourite topic as a journalist. In her articles she had defined her concept of Home Rule and the strategy for conducting it as an all India movement. Various issues of *The Commonweal* and *New India* of 1917, focus on these related issues.

To disseminate her message of Home Rule amongst the students especially, she supplemented her journalistic propaganda with a series of small pamphlets:

1. *India a Nation*.
2. *India and the Empire: Self-Government for India*.
3. *The Political Outlook*.
4. *Separation of Judicial and Executive Functions*.
5. *The Future of Young India*.
6. *East and West in India*.
7. *The India Council*.
8. *Under the Congress Flag*.
9. *Home Rule* (a series of articles from *New India*)

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43. E.R. Soobramany Aiyar, "Injustice Done to Mrs Besant", in *New India*, 8 June 1916.
45. Home Political Department, File no. 50, September 1917.
As a part of her political propaganda she wrote extensively on the harmful consequences of the British policy on agriculture. Having toured a number of places in South India, she focussed the attention of the educated people on the Government's defective policies which led to famines, deaths, food-riots and many other related issues. She, impressed upon her readers the necessity of coming forward and participating in her Home Rule Movement. She said to the British Government that:

You have to consider that poverty; you have to realise what it means; you have to know the agony of hunger and then think that hundreds of millions of the agricultural population is on the verge of starvation.46

She had also articulated her views on Gandhiji's method of struggle for national freedom - Satyagraha. She insisted that Gandhiji's Satyagraha was not a spiritual weapon:

For the spiritual world is an orderly world and the breaking of laws in our physical world, not because the conscience feels the laws to be broken to be so bad that obedience to it is disobedience to conscience, but because another person selects them for disobedience, seems to me at once illogical and unspiritual. So that the result of the action is very doubtful.47

46. New India, 30 December 1915.
47. The Theosophist, April 1919.
The Montagu Chelmsford Report published on 12 July 1918 formed the theme of a number of journalistic writings. It had aroused great controversy in India. It, at once, showed that there were fundamental differences between the Moderates and Extremists, and the issue was further complicated by the recommendations of the Rowlatt Commission, which were vehemently resisted. S.N. Banerjee in a confidential letter to Mr. Srinivas Sastri on 18 July 1918 wrote: "I fear the Special Session of the Congress led by Mrs. Besant and Tilak will vote for rejection." The Moderates under the Presidentship of Surendranath Banerjea passed a resolution that:

The conference while reserving its judgement upon details, welcomed the reform scheme as accomplishing a real and definite stage in the progressive realization of responsible government.

But on 14 July the proposals were criticised by the Extremists at the Bengal Provincial Conference, presided over by Biplab Chandra Pal. The cleavage of opinion was real. The Extremists and the Home Rulers rejected them and the Moderates accepted them, but asked for major alterations. Mrs. Besant and Tilak rejected it.

48. *New India*, 13 March 1918, 'Indian Politics'.
49. *Servants of India Society Papers*, File no. 14, May - August 1918. (In manuscript, NMHL)
saying that it was "unworthy of British to offer and unworthy of India to accept". She observed that:

...if its recommendations were given effect to, it would deprive the people of some of the very few privileges that they possessed in the name of liberty and subjected them to the rules of the police.52

Mrs. Besant was condemned by the Moderates for her critical attitude towards the Reforms. In the hope of retaining the support of the Moderates, she prevailed upon the Special Session of the Congress in September 1918 to consider the Reforms and to accept a compromise.

It demanded ... complete provincial autonomy in five years and for the transfer to elected Indian members in the central government of all powers other than those affecting war and internal security.53

Tilak and others wanted to reject the scheme altogether but agreed to it because it would prevent the Moderates seceding the Congress. In addition Montagu's declaration seemed to have convinced her that the "British were now responsive to Indian demands and that more could be won by consultation in the old moderate tradition than by agitation.

51. Maharatta, 14 July 1918, p.328.
52. The Commonweal, 26 July 1918.
54. Ibid., 87.
The Moderates had been estranged, however by Annie Besant’s bellicosity towards the British and by her inconsistency and they refused to attend this special Congress or the Annual Session in December 1918. She was abandoned by the Extremists also because "...of her growing appreciation of the Reform which she had earlier condemned" Thus by December Mrs Besant stood isolated from the mainstream of Indian politics. Annie Besant also wrote extensively about the Rowlatt Bill in her newspaper. In 1919 when the idea of passive resistance was mooted in connection with the Rowlatt Bill, she opposed it tooth and nail. She said:

Organised disobedience of laws, arranged by a committee blindly to be obeyed, in order to ‘discredit the Government’ is a crime against the nation far greater than that of armed rebellion - greater because it strikes at the foundation of social security, whereas the leaders of armed rebellion enforce law in the regions they occupy.55

She carefully explained her attitude towards Satyagraha by saying:

Society depends on obedience to law. The worst evil of bad laws is that they diminish respect for law; and the worst evil of the Rowlatt Act is that if substitutes executive force for law...57

56. *New India*, 18 September 1922.
She vehemently criticised Gandhiji's boycott of the Prince of Wales. Regarding this she said in her Presidential Address at Bombay in August 1921:

There are rules of dignity and of courtesy that no Nation, as no gentleman, can disregard with honour, and in the stately code of manners of Hinduism a guest is to be treated as a God. To insult an aged Prince, whose love for India made him accept the burden-some duty of an envoy that he might do India service, speak his grief for 'the shadow of Amritsar', and welcome her birth into Home Rule, was an ungracious and an unlikely act... He does not represent the Government of Great Britain... To boycott him is to insult the Monarch to whom we all owe allegiance, and to strike a blow at the British connection.58

One thing that lay very near to her heart was to draw Great Britain and India nearer to each other. India, she declared, wanted friendship with Britain on the 'basis of equality'.

Educational Reforms

Her articles touched upon the various aspects of education. In education she pleaded for flexibility and for reducing the number of examinations, lowering of fees, increase in the number of schools and colleges, encouragement of classical languages of India and the use of vernaculars, for the education of girls and of masses and, generally for universal education on National

lines. She was confident of arousing patriotic feelings through education. Explaining her viewpoint she observed:

Young men cannot be expected to make the sacrifice asked for unless they are inspired by a passionate love for their motherland such as emptied the universities of Great Britain the love of liberty and the hope of winning it and of becoming citizens of an empire of free nations will inspire.59

She asked people to donate money generously to education as it is "the best investment that a Nation can possibly make". She also wrote on the related issue of reforms in the examination system and co-education. She argued that:

Exams should be as easy and as little nerve racking as possible. The dislike for co-education is not a characteristic of our people alone. It is hotly debated in all countries of the world.61

She also condemned the educational superstition that the cane was necessary in the school. She replaced the theory of educating children by force with the idea of leading them to develop themselves through love and understanding. She emphasized the need of Indian boys to know the Indian history well; to learn the history of other nations only to broaden their outlook to strengthen and illuminate the mind.

59. New India, 2 March 1917.
60. The Commonweal, 6 November 1914.
61. Ibid., vol.6, no. 152, 24 November 1916.
Girl's education also figured in her writings. She discussed the nature and scope of girls education. She said that every Indian girl should be given "Religious and moral education; Literary education; knowledge of classical language — Sanskrit, Scientific education; Artistic and Physical education".  

Socio-Religious Reforms  

As a journalist Annie Besant used newspaper as an effective instrument for mobilising public opinion for change in social behaviour and abolition of evil social practices, customs and institutions. Some of these major socio-religious issues were uplift of depressed classes, abolition of child marriage, seclusion of women, colour-bar and the caste system.

Her special concern was the amelioration of the living conditions and the status of Shudras. She took up this issue in her lectures, later compiled in a book form *Wake Up India*. She criticised the haughty attitude of the upper caste towards the Shudras. She said:

You (Indians) complain, and justly, of the harsh and rude manners often shown to you by your English rulers, but are they one-hundredth part as insolent to you as you are insolent to this race whom you in the past have brought under your yoke.63

This issue was constantly kept alive through the columns of *New India* and *The Commonweal*. Her lectures, extensively published in her newspaper, became a part of her writings. In her lectures she decried the treatment meted out to the depressed classes and said that "...education is the lever by which we may hope to raise them..."

In the *Panchama* schools the teachers were ever on the alert to detect eye disease and the children's eyes were daily washed to prevent this eye disease. She said "The children of the depressed classes need first of all, to be taught cleanliness, outside decency of behavior..."

The oppressive social customs also did not escape her scalpel. She vehemently opposed child marriage and asked the people to do away with this evil custom. She promoted and encouraged the practice of remarriage of child widows. However, she discouraged widow remarriage in case of elderly widows. She said:

> It makes marriage a commercial contract of a union of bodies only as well disintegrating the sacred life of the family which is the dearest pride of Hindu.

She was pained by the conditions of the destitute and orphan children and urged people to help them by adopting them. In a

65. *Ibid*.
lecture at Madras in February 1913, she enlightened the people about the Madras Society for the Protection of Children, which prevented public and private wrong to children, helped destitute children and gave shelter and home to orphaned children by asking people to adopt them. She said:

If the tears of the little children, the groans of oppressed animals, ascend to God, they rot the foundation of a State and make hopeless the future of a nation.67

Annie Besant helped people to understand the religion from a different perspective. Her concern for all living beings was evident when she reminded the people that the true religion was serving of the helpless - be it man or animal. In an address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Madras Society for Protection and Care of Animals (S.P.C.A.) on 16 March 1910, she told the people that animals should not be overloaded and that every man and woman should make it his or her duty to check every act of cruelty inflicted on animals. She said that animals should be "...divided into classes according to size, and then to assign a maximum load for an animal in each class". In the.

69. Annie Besant, n.67, p. 86.
Theosophical Society every member took a pledge every morning to do his best to stop any act of cruelty towards animals which he would see during the day.

She focussed on religious issues and wrote extensively on the religious reforms in Hinduism and tried to make people conscious about the prevalent superstitions and wrote on Vedanta theory and glorious cultural traditions. She stood for individual liberty and mutual respect, regarding all religions as ways to God and recognizing the religious consciousness. She fought against the superstitions of foreign travel among Indians. She told them that "knowledge of lands other than his own is essential... India is to be no isolated country..."

Thus through her speeches and writings she enlightened the Indians about the urgent need for socio-religious regeneration. She urged them to recover their pride in their culture and civilization and to demand for self-government for India.

What was the cause of her success in the field of journalism? Annie Besant’s long apprenticeship with the journal *The National Reformer* had equipped her with professional skill as a journalist. Besides, her experience as a pamphlet writer helped her as a journalist.

As a journalist Besant had talked of cooperation; but created revolution in the minds of men. Her strategy was to talk of cooperation and not sedition so that she could enlist the support of influential sections of Moderate India to the cause of agitation. She said, "One thing that lies very near to our heart is to draw Great Britain and India nearer to each other, by making known in Great Britain something of Indian movements, and of the men who will influence from here the destinies of the Empire". She tried to show the Indians and prove to them that their demands for Home Rule was right. When she deliberately acted in defiance of the British Government, it was to make it more responsive to the people so that they could be weaned away from the path of violence.

The next chapter gives a detailed account of the genesis, growth and decline of the Home Rule Movement and its contribution in strengthening India's case for self-government, the much cherished goal of Annie Besant.

72. The Commonweal, 2 January 1914.