Chapter VII
Besant -- Crusader for India's Home Rule
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BESANT - CRUSADER FOR INDIA'S HOME RULE

Contours of South Indian Politics

For a proper understanding of Mrs. Besant's political career and her crusade for Home Rule in India, it is essential to peer into the political conditions prevailing in South India amidst which she made her debut in this field. By 1800, the British had acquired most of the territory what was to become the Presidency of Madras. Madras Presidency, the Southern most province of British India, was one of the most extensive of all the British territories in India. It stretched from the tip of the Indian peninsula, Cape Comorin, halfway up the east coast to Bengal. Various factors such as its geographical remoteness and the feeling of isolation, the language difference and the existence of the ryotwari settlement - all contributed to the development of what is called 'Madras Style' of administration. At its highest levels, Madras was governed by three separate policy bodies: the Secretary-of-State-in Council in London, the Government of India in Calcutta (later Delhi) and the Government of Fort St. George in Madras City. Each of these institutions pursued its own ends, judged the result it obtained by different standards and overlapped scarcely at all in
What were the major occupations of the people? Eighty seven per cent of the people of South India depended on agriculture. Geographical setting provided favourable conditions for agriculture. The British Government followed harsh policies and this resulted in the drain of South Indian wealth to England. Thus people instead of becoming richer became poorer. The Annual Reports of the Administration of Madras Presidency furnish proof of the defective agricultural policies of the Government.

The working condition of workers were arduous.... During the first World War, the living conditions of the workers worsened. There was a steep rise in prices of essential commodities with wages stagnating relatively.

So much so that basic necessities of life too were in short supply. These policies resulted in creating frustration among the masses as the failure of crops had led to famine; starvation became the order of the day. "The government imposed strict control on market in an attempt to halt inflation and cut down profiteering." High prices, new taxes and new controls sparked off a wave of discontent among the urban elites. This in turn provided fuel for an upsurge of political activity.

At this time in the political atmosphere there was a sudden and unexpected dearth of prominent leaders to lead India forward.

2. Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and condition of India during the year 1917-1918. (Annual Reports), pp.68-82.
Gopal Krishan Gokhale had died on 19 February, 1915 and Pherozeshah Mehta followed him in November 1915. D.E. Wacha was fairly old and infirm. S.N. Banerjea was not quite in tune with the new current thought. B.G. Tilak who was released in June 1914 was physically shattered and it was just not possible for him to take a number of strenuous whirlwind tours of various regions of India. Lala Lajpat Rai, who was in U.S.A. in 1915, felt unhappy with the state of affairs in India. Gandhi had just arrived in India and it would take him a few years before he could project himself in the centre stage of Indian politics. Leadership at this time was almost passing from the Indian nation to the bureaucracy.

At this point of time, Indian politics was mainly organised and manipulated by western-educated politicians. The political scene was controlled by moderate politicians who adhered to constitutional methods and were thus favoured by the British Government. Mrs. Besant, who was neither a Moderate nor an Extremist, seemed to be the right kind of leader to fill in the political void as she was an individualist in politics and expressed her dissatisfaction with the routine like political activities of Indian National Congress (I.N.C.). As she wished to have quick, result-oriented political activities, she was forced by circumstances to enter the political arena. To clarify her position, she observed:

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It is possible that I should have never jumped into political work, had not increasing repression by the authority, narrowing of liberty, the ill treatment of students and the danger of revolution forced me into the field.3

Thus, sensing the need of the time, she graduated from Theosophy to politics. Kanji Dwarkadas, her close co-worker, has referred to Annie Besant's occult explanation of her entry into politics in the following words:

In 1913 she came into direct conscious touch with the great Indian leader the Master Jupiter, known as Rishi Agastya, the Regent of India in the Inner Government. He desired her to form a small band of people who were brave enough to defy wrong social customs, such as premature marriage. That same autumn she gave her forceful lecture on 'Wake Up! India' and thus prepared the way for the desired political reform.4

Obviously, Annie Besant, whose apprenticeship to politics began in the South, was well informed about the development of political ideas with reference to the constituents of the British Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Most British colonies were granted dominion status except India which despite its vastness of area, rich resources, diverse population and ancient cultural heritage was still a dependency of the

3. *New India*, 4 April 1917.
British. Fully convinced of India's fitness for self-government, Annie Besant lashed at the discriminatory British colonial policy which had granted dominion status to some of its colonies but perpetuated India's status as a dependency. Why then should India be ignored and not granted freedom? Home Rule for India ought to be the cry of Indians and the credit of leavening Indian politics with this national spirit undoubtedly belongs to Annie Besant and Tilak.

Annie Besant's Emergence in the South Indian Politics

Mrs. Besant found her entry into the South Indian politics with ease partly because she had a strong hold in Madras. For almost two decades, she had been active in forming local branches of her society, preparing and publishing translation of Hindu classics, and advancing the cause of social reform through her Hindu Reform Association. While campaigning for political reform, she stepped into a vacuum of political leadership in the South created by the death of G. Subramaniya Iyer. Iyer's moderate leadership of the Madras Congress had lost its effectiveness and grip owing to his failing health in 1908. Since then, many had looked up to Mrs. Besant as the foremost spoke-person for nationalism in Madras. G.Subramaniya Iyer, a prominent and veteran nationalist agitator in the 1870's and 1880's, the founder of The Hindu newspaper, and of the Congress was a controversial figure. He had quarrelled with his colleagues over social reform and had virtually out casted himself and was
In 1907 he fired his polemic against Mylapore (a place in Madras dominated by Brahmans) and drew a "following from young and poor members of the intelligentsia and other similarly frustrated social elements." In the manner of every other Indian agitator of our period, he sought to enlist the aid of "...religious revivalism to his cause"

After G. Subramaniya Iyer's demise, people looked up to Mrs. Besant to fill the vacuum for leading India onwards. By 1914 Besant's entry into politics was noticed outside the Madras Presidency as she joined the Congress in 1914. The Bombay Chronicle, an important paper in Bombay, wrote on 2nd July 1914, "It is not impossible that the entrance of Mrs. Besant into the field of political agitation may prove to be one of the most important events of recent years..."

Around the turn of the century i.e. last decade of the nineteenth century circumstances in Madras began to change. A particular group of men in Madras who called themselves as Mylapore set were gaining popularity in Madras. At the core of the group were some of the most successful lawyers and administrators of the province. They were rich and highly educated, their families had furnished the bulk of the legal and service communities of the province, and their clienteles and

5. Home Political (B) May 1908, File no. 36-43, (N.A.I.)
6. Home Rule (B) December 1907, File no. 2-9, (N.A.I.)
personal networks stretched all over the region. Their knowledge and their wide range of contacts made them indispensable as advisers and assistants to the bureaucracy. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the influence of a handful of men had become quite extraordinary and they found their way into other important positions in the capital as well. In the 1880's when Government was contemplating constitutional changes which would grant more jobs and more influence to Indians, the Congress became a powerful organ for agitation. Once devolution of power secured and Mylaporeans had benefited, they brought the Congress smartly to heel. Thus during the All-India battle between the Extremists and Moderates in the first decade of the twentieth century, Mylapore kept the Madras Congress firmly in the Moderate Camp; and after the Surat split of 1907, the Mylaporean leaders kept the Extremists out of the Madras provincial Congress and virtually killed the Congress organisations in the districts, lest it should disturb the political calm in which their influence was so secure. During the 1914-18 war, economic strains and the increased pressure of Government interference have made many of Mylapore's clients restive and anxious for more power to influence Government. Meanwhile the British Government was penniless, anxious and susceptible, and it had hinted that it would, in return for Indian loyalty and assistance during hostilities, consider constitutional concessions once peace was established. Mylaporeans, and other Indian leaders in similar positions in other provinces decided to press a hard bargain for their continued assistance to the British Government in the hope that they could thus transform their undeniable influence into
more formal power.

The vehicle for the Mylaporean demand was the Home Rule League in which Mylapore allied with Mrs. Besant. The Home Rule League (H.R.L.) founded on 1 September 1916, linked Mylapore's influence in the city and its network in the mofussil (district) with Mrs. Besant's province-wide organisation of Theosophical Societies, which already had a great appeal to the educated Indians. In 1916-17 the League, in collaboration with similar organisations in other provinces, mounted an impressive campaign against the British Government in India, which would eventually result in her internment, and added to her popularity and status as a political leader.

Before discussing the movement in detail, it's worthwhile to focus on Mrs. Besant's advantages as a political leader. Her greatest asset lay in her ability to provide her campaign with ready made machinery. As the President of the Theosophical Society she controlled an organisation with several thousand members, which linked the Presidency capital to every large town. When she converted this to political purposes, she was able to inaugurate her movement with a strong support base and a sophisticated structure of command in as many as 'thirty four' separate localities.

Being a 'newspaper baron' she had an effective communication network in the form of her newspaper *New India* and her weekly *The Commonweal*. She began a definite propaganda for Home Rule in

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8. *Hindu* (daily), 4 September 1916.
her paper *New India* from January 1916. It was entitled 'Home Rule Section' covering three pages "printing therein articles in favour of self-government from all shades of opinion." To supplement and invigorate the campaign, Mrs. Besant also published a series of articles entitled 'Winning Self-Government', in her weekly paper *The Commonweal*. Her editorials, articles, speeches and activities provoked the Government greatly.

After having joined Annie Besant, Mylapore had rallied all resources and authority to argue its case for Home Rule much more effectively and keenly than would otherwise have been possible. By the autumn of 1916, the H.R.L. had accomplished the seemingly impossible: it had united warring factions of the old Congress under a single leadership and it had catapulted Mrs. Besant to a position of national importance. Having, witnessed the movement for self-government in her homeland Ireland she thought that the same could be extended to India because it could alone solve India's intricate problem.

**Mrs. Besant's views on India's case for Home Rule.**

Mrs. Besant's arguments for Home Rule for India had grown out of her economic critique of the British rule in India. In order to enlighten the people on the need of self-government, she exposed the reality and nature of the British rule honestly

and without any bias. She explained to the Indians the causes of their economic backwardness and poverty. By imposing heavy land revenue, the British had reduced the peasant to poverty and which in turn led them into debt trap. Thus, starvation and under nourishment resulted in the terrible infantile morality. She blamed the exploitative British rule for the terrible poverty in India and for crushing the life out of the people. An allied cause of poverty, she remarked, was the drain of Indian wealth.

A tribute of £16,000,000 sterling were given annually by India for the distribution of pension, Home charges etc. Another £16,900,000 went in private remittances sent by English officials in India and in the balance of trade. Putting together £32,900,000 went to England out of Indian revenue and earnings. It is most unfair to make India pay for an Army which would be used for British defence. She embellished her lectures and talks with glaring and concrete examples. Referring to the destruction of Indian trade she blamed the British totally for its deplorable policy on cotton which was a source of great income for India. In order to promote the trade of Lancashire, which needed foreign markets, the British imposed duty on Indian Cotton mills. Moreover, Indian cultivators were forced to grow long - stapled cotton which suited the British manufacturers. These were some of the reasons why India needed to look after her interest herself.

Around the same time Indians like Dadabhai Naroji, R.C. Ranade and Tilak also criticised the British. In her *magnum opus* *India Wrought For Freedom* (1915), she gave the following reasons for launching the movement for Home Rule:

1. British rule has destroyed her village and council Government and has put in its place a hybrid system of Board and Councils which are impotent for good because well informed Indian opinion is overruled by officials who come, knowing nothing of India and seek to impose English methods on an ancient land which has its own traditions. Indians want to rebuild and improve their own system, beginning with Panchayats and working upwards, untrammelled by foreign experts.

2. British rule, after eighty years of its education, is educating 5% of the population and bases her denial of liberty on the 'microscopical minority' of the educated due to her own policy. British education is not only microscopic but it is ill-directed; it was arranged with a view of supplying clerks and some professional men in order to enable the British Government to be carried on.

3. British rule has destroyed India's finest arts and industries in order to favour the importation of cheap foreign goods and even in machine industry....It encourages the export of raw materials which come back as manufactured articles, thus paralysing Indian industrial efforts for the benefit of foreigners.

4. British rule has regulated irrigation. Huge tracts of land, especially in the North-West, have consequently become deserts, which were formerly rich and fertile.
5. British rule is extremely costly; it employs Europeans in the highest salaries and introduce them everywhere as 'experts'—experts ignorant of the conditions in which they are working ... huge annual drain.

6. British rule has substituted coercion for improvements in Government, like any other autocracy. It has just revived the Press Act (1930), India would sweep all the coercive legislation away. She would emulate British rule in Britain, not British rule in India. 12

She educated the people regarding her concept of Home Rule through her daily *New India*. She carried on her task of awakening the people by commenting upon popular grievances and their possible remedies hoping to make the HR movement broad based by involving cross sections of Indian society. She criticised the policy of exporting grains from the country at the time of scarcity and famine. Not only this, she cautioned the Government, to show consideration to the wishes of the people. Having thus prepared the way, she launched a Home Rule movement on the lines of Irish Home Rule in 1914. She also started campaign for self-government for India from March 1915 onwards stressing on the revival of her Panchayat system, which she felt would uproot the growing tyranny of petty officials in rural life as well as for removing the sources which were rapidly contaminating the fountains of Indian life.

Before launching Home Rule agitation Annie Besant prepared the mental ethos for the acceptance of her arguments in favour of self-government for India through her associations like Sons of India; Young Men's Indian Association; Young Women's Indian Association and through Press. *The Hindu* noted, "...she had close ties...with a large body of highly volatile material which could be used to heat any political agitation."

In order to educate the people on this issue, she defined the meaning of HR in simple language, as the government of the people and by the people. It meant the right of the people to send their representatives to make laws for the people to levy taxes. Subjection to laws not made by representatives of the people was tyranny. Home Rule meant freedom without separation from the British Empire as India at that time was not in a fit position to rule the country independently. She preferred to use HR instead of self-government because it was short and for a popular cry, a short name was better than a long one. This movement did not give a new political doctrine, but it supplied a new slogan to the national movement.

As a part of her Home Rule propaganda, she implored the people to cast away the barriers of casteism and colour bar, because growth of mutual self-respect was the precondition if two different people were to act together. Realizing the necessity of inculcating feelings of patriotism among students, she underlined the need for the establishment of national colleges and universities.

She argued that patriotism "could not be reared in the Government or missionary schools or colleges, where the teachers felt pride in the greatness of a foreign country rather than India." She felt that patriotism could be instilled by familiarising the Indian youth with the stirring Indian tales about Rajputs, Akbar and Shivaji. She argued, that "let us not rob our boys of their heritage, nor turn their eyes away from the star-studded sky that arches over Bharatvarsha....Patriotism must be planted in the heart as it grows in the nursery and in the school." She had started her propaganda much before the HRL was founded in September 1916. The 'Propaganda Fund' started earlier in the year had already sold 300,000 copies of 26 English pamphlets which focussed mainly on the system of government existing in India and the argument for self-government. Many Moderate Congressmen who were dissatisfied with the inactivity of the Congress also joined the HR agitation. She planned a comprehensive plan of action for which she prepared the blueprint of the structure of self-government as is evident from the chart on the next page.

14. Home Department, Political (Confidential) Proceeding, September 1916, File no. 652-656. (NAI)
15. New India, 7 January 1915, p.4a-c.
### Structure of Self-Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Election Method</th>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Population Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>Election by Universal Ward</td>
<td>MATRIC</td>
<td>(below a certain population)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panchayat</td>
<td>Suffrage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taluq Board</td>
<td>Elected by village and Ward Council and residents</td>
<td>Intermediate level</td>
<td>(Over a certain population)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of the area over 25 years of age.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Elected by second grade MUNICIPALITIES</td>
<td>Graduate level</td>
<td>(Over a certain population)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board</td>
<td>Councils and residents over the age of 30 years.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Parliament</td>
<td>Elected by the Council of the third grade and residents over 35 years.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### National Parliament

She began from the bottom—with village in the country and ward in the town as the units. She was amply clear in her mind that restoration of happy and healthy Indian village community life alone would help India rediscover herself. She held that...
every adult of twenty one years of age and of sound mind and
free from crime must have his share of control, his voice in the
management of affairs. The village electorate would elect the
village council and members were required to be educated at
least upto primary level. By this way, village would become
articulate through its Panchayat.

The corresponding unit in the towns to the village in the
country was the ward. The first grade of the council the ward
council, like the village should be elected, by universal
suffrage, the electors being over twenty one years of age.

The second grade of the Councils would be Taluq Boards in
the Country and Municipalities in the towns below a certain
population and the electors here should be the village and the
ward council and all men and women over twenty-five years of
age, residing in the area, who had educational qualifications
upto matriculation and suggested proportional representation so
that majority as well as minority should be represented equally.

The third grade of Councils would be the District Boards in
the country and Municipalities in towns over a certain
population, and here the electors would be the second grade
councils, and all men and women residents of the area over thirty
years of age and educated upto intermediate standard.

Next would be the Provincial Parliament, elected by the
Councils of the third grade, and by all men and women residents
of the province of over thirty-five years and educated upto
graduate level. The Provincial Government would be a Ministry,

responsible to the Parliament, with a Governor appointed by the
Crown. Above all this would be the National Parliament with
control over all National affairs i.e. army, navy, post, railways
etc. and they in turn would send representatives to the Imperial
Parliament. This scheme of Government, she felt was extremely
helpful in creating political awakening among Indians, because
this would enable the people to take an active part in the
struggle for the attainment of self-government. The villages
remained the kingpin of the entire structure, that was why she
reiterated in 1915 that villages deserved greater attention than
the towns because there were

720,342 villages with a total population of
285,408,168 the number of towns is only 2,153; their
population being 29,748,228 only. If the country is to
advance, the villages must grow side by side with the
towns.

Hence she propagated this system of village panchayat.

Home Rule Propaganda Abroad

The Home Rule propaganda was also conducted abroad. Realising
that it was not enough for the Home Rule agitation to confine
itself to India, Mrs. Besant wanted to make a direct approach
to the Britshers. Making use of her powerful and influential
friends in England, who were only too glad to help her for the
noble cause, and they formed an Auxiliary of the Besant Home

18. New India, 10 April 1915.
19. Ibid.
20. New India, vol 57, no. 107, 8 May 1915.
Rule League in London on 7 June 1916. George Lansbury was a Theosophist and had worked with Mrs. Besant during 1880's and early 1890's. He was interested in India and in a letter to Graham Pole on 24 November 1917 he wrote telling Mrs. Besant that she would find a good Home Rule movement to welcome her when next she came to England. Mrs. Besant was aware that the popularity of the Home Rule League had aroused the anger and suspicion in the minds of some Britishers.

Unmindful of the criticism, the London Home Rule League carried on the spade-work by holding meetings, interviewing newspaper editors and also working for her release when interned. With a View to expanding the scope of the London Home Rule League, meetings were held with representatives of several organisations and as a result an Indian Parliamentary Committee was formed. In addition to its council "it had 152 corresponding Members scattered over the boroughs of England, Wales and Scotland through whom literature, pamphlets and information was circulated". "Between 200 and 250 Trade Unions and Labour Organisations were affiliated to the Committee to help in.

21. Home Department, Political (A), March 1917, File no. 35-53. The official record cited the comments of *The Times* (London), 1917 "cranky people in this country do many mad things but surely the maddest is to encourage a 'Home Rule' agitation in India at a moment when we are entering upon the great crisis of the war."

22. Annie Besant Papers, 'Allied Societies', Reel no.4, p.52. (NMML)
agitation for India's Freedom" Thus many meetings were held in London in the interest of Indians. Mrs. Besant submitted a memorandum to the Joint Select Committee of the Parliament in which she accepted Dyarchy in the Provinces but added that full Provincial Autonomy to be granted in five years and responsibility in the Central Government and full responsible Government in India within fifteen years. Not only this, through a weekly newspaper *United India* called the "new and splendid sentinel of the National Movement," she propagated the cause of Indians as it represented "the different schools of Indian political thought, which sought to establish a Responsible Government in India by successive stages and thus strengthening the ties between Britain and India."

The London Home Rule League aroused the demand for Indian Home Rule even among the Trade Unions and later got that demand incorporated in the Labour Party Programme. The League was dissolved on 9 September 1920 after having achieved the immediate objective of Home Rule.

24. *United India*, vol 1, no.16, 14 June 1920.
25. Annie Besant Papers, 'Allied Societies', Reel no.4, p.52.
Besides the London branch, its branches were formed in other countries. On 4 January 1918, a branch of Home Rule for India League was "started in New York with Hindus and Americans as members with Lala Lajpat Rai as President." The activities of the organisation consisted of the publication of a monthly magazine *Young India*, which furnished information about India in the form of articles to magazines and newspapers. The Home Rule records show that papers and books on India were made available to the general public and material was furnished to libraries in various cities. It can be said that Annie Besant's manifold propaganda activities performed a helpful rule in projecting India's case for Home Rule. Through deputations abroad, she presented the correct picture of the happenings in India and the nature of the British rule before the Crown Government and the British public, who were quite ignorant about these and growing Indians aspirations. It was chiefly on the basis of her support in England that she had calculated to launch her agitation in India. It was for this reason that Indians respected and entrusted their future in her hands.

**Formation of Home Rule League**

On 25 December 1915, Annie Besant called a meeting to discuss the establishment of a Home Rule League. Those present (about 200) comprised the All-India Congress Committee,

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27. *The Commonweal*, 1 March 1918. For corroboration see Lajpat Rai, *Young India* (Delhi, 1968), 2nd reprint.
28. Indian Home Rule Foreign Correspondence, File, no.17 (Manuscript, NMML)
Source: Compiled on the basis of Annie Besant's writings including her autobiography, speeches and biographies as mentioned in the Bibliography.
the Council of the Muslim League, and the signatories to the invitation, but it was a private meeting held in China Bagh in Bombay, and not a meeting of representatives of these two bodies as such. The meeting was prescribed by S.N. Banerjea. Mrs. Besant placed her H.R.L. scheme before the Committee P.C. Mitter (Bengal) moved an amendment to refer the subject to the Congress and the Muslim League. Eventually, S.N. Banerjea tried to get Mrs. Besant to accept the amendment. There was a great deal of heated discussion over the related issues. In her book *The Future of Indian Politics*, she explained the need of forming this organisation because:

Congress showed little activity between its annual sessions that the need for Home Rule League had arisen to be an active propagandist body and the words Home Rule were chosen as a short public cry, making the fact clear that the struggle was not against Britain, but for liberty within the Empire.31

The Bombay Congress of 1915 adopted a resolution affirming that the time had arrived to introduce self-government. The Moderates who had dominated, the Congress did not take any steps to implement the resolution as they feared that an organisation

30. Home Department, Political (A), February 1916, File no.454-457 and K.W.
like the Home Rule League would perhaps weaken the Congress. Though Annie Besant did not succeed in getting the Congress and the Muslim League to support her decision to set up H.R.L. She managed to persuade the Congress to have a programme of educative propaganda and to a revival of the local level Congress Committees. Knowing fully well the incapacity of the Congress to implement it she inserted a condition by which she would start her activity of H.R.L. independently by September 1916 if the Congress failed to do so by then. But when the Congress Committee failed to produce the draft of the Home Rule scheme by September 1916, she thought it obligatory on her part to announce the formation of H.R.L. It was finally inaugurated on 1 September, 1916.

Aims of the Home Rule League

The chief aim of the Home Rule League was to attain Home Rule or self-government within the British Empire by all constitutional means and to educate and organise public opinion in the country towards the attainment of the same. Annie Besant herself had spelt out the following objectives.

1. To secure Home Rule for India through all law-abiding and constitutional activity.

2. To maintain the connection with Great Britain by becoming a Free Nation within the British Empire, under the Imperial Crown of His Majesty the King Emperor George V and his successors.

3. To support and strengthen the National Congress, which laboured for more than thirty years to lay the foundation of Indian Self-Government.

4. To carry on a continuous educative propaganda on the necessity of Home Rule for India.

32. Annie Besant: Personal File, Reel no.4, pp.8-9.(NMML).
Membership and working of H.R.L.

Membership of the League was open to all men and women over "twenty one years of age excepting school students and undergraduates". Three members would form a branch. The members had to pay rupees ten as entrance fee and a life subscription fee. About five hundred persons enrolled themselves as members of the League in the first meeting held "in Madras at 5 p.m. on 3rd September 1916" Mrs. Besant was the President and "G.S. Arundale the General Secretary, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar was one of the General Secretaries, and B.P. Wadia the Treasurer." Business was carried out by these four officials from Adyar, which was Mrs. Besant’s headquarter. She first won over its organisers and supporters to the cause of Home Rule. Her League attracted women in large number and as a result the League’s 'best recruiter and recruits' were among the women. She said "Indian women are of keen intelligence... devotional [sic]... and love their land and home with a fine ardour" and they in turn were instrumental in teaching Home Rule to the new generation. Every member was given H.R.L. badge which was a silver pendant studded with a pointed star of the Indian Empire with H.R. in red engraved in the centre. A red and green ribbon was attached to the pendant. The colours red and green symbolised the Hindus and the Muslims. The Home Rule Flag was also red and green.

34. New India, 4 September 1916.
35. Ibid.
36. The Commonweal, vol.6, no.144, 29 September 1916, 'The Outlook'.

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Working of H.R.L.

The working of the League was very simple. No elaborate organisation was structured. In fact, any three persons could form a branch, which resulted in the establishment of two hundred branches. Each branch enjoyed virtual autonomy and the entry fee was rupee one. The Organising Secretary was allowed to sanction the formation of the branches. Regarding her modus operandi H.F. Owen commented that she maintained communication through individuals, who were either active in a particular branch or were in touch with a number of branches.

The membership drive for H.R. was so vigorous that by September 1915 "the League had the strength of two thousand members, with forty one branches." The number of branches of H.R.L. "went up to fifty by 6 October 1916". By September 1917 Home Rule had 32 branches in the Presidency, 63 in Tamilnadu, 48 in Andhra, 12 in Kannada speaking district of Madras and 9 in Malabar. Seeking its rapid popularity, Gandhi remarked "... when the Leagues were first established, I looked upon them with scepticism and even doubted their usefulness, a careful examination of their work has convinced me that the Leagues have supplied a felt want. They have put light into the people. They have filled them with hope and courage."

38. The Commonweal, 29 September 1916.
39. Ibid., 6 October 1916
40. New India, 11 September 1917, p.3.
Though there was an extensive network there was no organised method for passing on instructions. Instructions were conveyed through individual members and through Arundale’s column on H.R. in Besant’s *New India*. Surprisingly, the Besant’s League membership was slower than that of Tilak. There were various reasons for this. Firstly, Tilak began his political activities much before joining the Congress which is evident from the fact that at a meeting at Poona in May 1915 he decided to set up an agency “to enlighten the villagers regarding the objects and work of the Congress.” He published pamphlets in Gujrati and Kannada also and published 6 Marathi and 2 English pamphlets of Home Rule of which 47,000 copies were sold. He was popular for expressing the idea of expelling the British from India and his activities in this sphere led him to prosecution by the British. When HR movement gathered momentum the Government hit at him by issuing a show cause notice and demanding securities of Rs.60,000. Regarding this he said “HR will now spread like wildfire.” Though Tilak lost the case in Magistrate’s Court he was exonerated by High Court. This victory led to celebrations all over India and the membership rose to 14,000 members by April 1917. Moreover his papers *Kesari; the Aarit Bazar Patrika, Jugantar* advocated a determined struggle against the colonial rule. These newspapers were widely read aloud in the streets and squares in large audiences of illiterate people eager to

42. Bombay Police Report 1915, para 568. (NAI)
learn the latest political news. It was precisely the extensive political agitation and the use of local language press as a mass organiser and propagandist that immensely promoted the influence of Tilak. His extensive tours of Maharashtra where he awakened and mobilized the people by lectures popularising the demand of Home Rule saying, "India was like a son who had grown up and attained majority. It was right now that the trustees or the father should give him what was his due. The people of India must get this effected. They have a right to do so".

Work Plan of Home Rule League and Propaganda Activities

The Home Rule League formulated a strategy to educate and familiarise Indians with the aims of the Home Rule. Its educational work was to be carried out in various ways:

(a) By issuing pamphlets, papers and books of Home and allied subjects such as mentioned.
(b) Organising lecture series by men of learning and authority throughout the country on Home Rule.
(c) Preparing a petition in the form of 'Petition of Rights' or drafting actually a bill to be passed by both the Houses of Parliament and that petitions or bills to be got signed by as large a number of people as possible.
(d) For organising lectures and tours, the whole country should be divided into various circles and the lectures to be delivered should be as far as possible neatly written on and approved of by the proper authorities of the league.

44. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, His Writings and Speeches (Madras, n.d.), pp. 116-17.
(e) A deputation of influential men should be sent to England in order to enlist the sympathy of prominent members of the Parliament.

(f) A tour should be undertaken by some prominent men throughout the British Isles to educate and enlighten public opinion there.45

The H.R.L. equipped its workers with relevant literature which included leaflets, pamphlets and published lectures. In order to enable them to spread the message of Home Rule to the educated Indians in the farthest corners of the country. Each Home Rule member was expected to open a Home Rule League room in every town and village to call meetings to strengthen the propaganda. According to Mrs. Besant the H.R.L was a separate body and had taken up work which the congress was not doing in its annual sessions and rare committee meetings. Mrs. Besant increased the tempo and sharpness of her propaganda work through Press and platform New India and The Commonweal did valuable propaganda work for Home Rule. From 5 January 1916 she started a 'Home Rule Section' in the paper New India which printed articles in favour of self-government from all shades of opinion.

Since Mrs. Besant wanted to involve the cross section of Indian society to mobilise public support she incorporated all issues of crop failures and famine riots in her League activities and drew the attention of the educated Indians to

45. Annie Besant, File no.13B-II, Reel no.4. (In microfilm NAI)
46. For details read Annie Besant: Personal File, Reel no.4, pp.25-26. (NMML)
the defective policies of the British on agriculture which led to the scarcity of food, starvation and then imposed on the people the necessity of coming forward and participating in her HR movement. She said:

... you have to consider that poverty [sic] 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.47

The negative portrayal of the nature of British rule had disillusioned the urban educated classes. She was trying to bring an attitudinal change among them by telling them about the exploitation of peasantry under the colonial rule. This is evident from the anxiety expressed by the British officials in the report. The Government source reported "... there are indications of the initiation of a special campaign for village work, based mainly on the distribution of vernacular pamphlets.... Hitherto the district reports have for the most part pictured the Home Rule movement as confined to younger vakils and students in Central towns, but in the report from the Guntur districts for the past fortnight the Collector lays stress upon the activities of the League in the delta village of the Tenali taluk. New India he writes, owing largely to its cheapness, has a very wide circulation in rural areas...." 48

47. New India, 30 December 1915, p.7.
48. Home Political Department, January 1917, File no.44.
She had been partially able to arouse the interest and sympathy of peasantry for the cause of Home Rule. It is evident from the letters of two ryots from Anantpur districts, who had protested against her internment to the editor of Andhra Patrika. They wrote, "We are not cattle you would take us to be. Though we are ignorant of some smattering knowledge of English, we have the capacity to manage our village concerns, and to satisfactorily conduct the Panchayat affairs."

This revealed that the support of the agriculturists was an important element for the success of H.R. campaign. Taking advantage of her growing interest in the political affairs of the country, the Madras HR leaders tried to open their eyes about their exploitation at the hands of the revenue officers and the landlords and also about their deteriorating conditions. Not only this to further mobilise public support she discussed the advantage of HR as it would "secure the reduction of taxes secure reduction in the prices of food stuffs, to get more trucks for carrying of goods, to get railway authorities to run more trains..."

Though Mrs. Besant was using these arguments to popularise the idea of HR whether her message was reaching the peasants is a question worth dwelling on the Guntur report and remarks of Andhra Patrika do not reveal the popularity of HR in rural areas. Since her target group was the educated people her message

49. New India, 5 January 1917, p.3.
50. Home Political Department, January 1918, File no.2.
never reached the peasants because there was no sign whether they understood or appreciated what was meant by H.R. She definitely touched on the problems of peasants but there were no crucial agitations, like later on Gandhi's Kheda Campaign which compelled public workers to establish contacts with actual life of the peasants. Peasants learnt to "identify themselves" with Gandhi which Besant failed to do.

Mrs. Besant even enlisted the sympathy and active support of the factory workers who turned to H.R.L. for guidance and support. That is why the Madras Labour Union, the first Trade Union was founded in India on 27 April 1918 with B.P. Wadia as its President. The involvement of nationalist leader in Trade Union Work was with the expectation that under the then mooted constitutional reforms a section of the working class would be enfranchised. Espousal of the cause of labour would win their sympathy and support in the elections to be held under the new Constitutional reforms, and the labourers would be a "potential force which would bring Swaraj to India". Actually the object was to get control over the labouring classes from unions, align them with unions of foreign countries and then to strike at imperialism. But the workers at this stage lacked confidence in their own ability to formulate their demands and argue their case before the employers and the Government. For all these reasons they turned to H.R.L., but no effective measures were taken by Besant in this direction like the

52. Home Political Department, January 1913, File no. 49. (NAI)
Match Makers Strike in London. She left this field clear for Gandhi.

She seemed to be content with the support of the educated section especially students. She concentrated her attention on the student class as school boys read *New India*, regularly, studied her political pamphlets and attended H.R. classes and lectures laying special stress on the great part which the "youth of today will play in the future of India". In her drive for HR she mainly concentrated her attention on the educated class and probably this has been the main reason for her failure to reach the masses. Its intriguing that why Besant did not learn the common language of the people and live amongst them. That is why she was an elitist national worker who tried to educate the elitist class of society i.e. the educated people in India especially Brahmins.

For promoting self reliance and improvement of the economic condition of Indians especially workers and peasants, she incorporated the issue of *Swadeshi* in Home Rule movement, but she did not make *Swadeshi* an ideological event like Gandhi. It was not political weapon as Gandhi used it later on for the Kheda campaign in 1918.

Home Rule was a new slogan and not a new political doctrine. Home Rule League's sprang up in most towns, what worried the Government was the sign of unrest in rural areas and "the vague notion that in some unknown way the British Raj was going wrong or going under, and Swaraj was coming to put all things right."

53. Home Political Department, January 1917, File no.44.
54. *The Hindu*, 4 September 1905. The *Swadeshi* movement which got its real drive and initiative from the Calcutta Congress session of 1910 was merged into it.
55. Home Political Department, October 1917, File no.572 (N.A.1.)
So shaken up were the Britishers that the Home Member of the Government of India R.H. Craddock wrote to the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India Harold Stuart that:

The National Congress must either drop its colonial Swaraj creed or cease to exist. How long are we going to listen to this nonsense about Swaraj on the colonial system which ... is an impossible ideal and ... Even deportations loses its terror if the deportee comes back again in a short time.... Mandalay and Aden ... are not much use; it should be St. Helena. There can be no recognition of men like these, no talk, where they are concerned, of the liberty of the press, freedom of speech. The disloyalists must be created as outside the pale of liberal laws and liberal institutions; blow after blow must be struck at them. 56

But the Government of India headed by Lord Minto took no such step of deporting Besant.

Realizing the growing popularity of Mrs. Besant's agitation, which was 'loyal and law abiding' but also persistently tending towards the ending of the repressive Government. She regarded her agitation as constitutional. While the British Government "recognised that the advocacy for Home Rule was legitimate but they objected to Mrs. Besant's methods". Whereas Mrs. Besant was very happy that her message had reached the ears of majority of educated Indians and she said that she may be ruined but Home Rule for India was secured by her method and she was content to pay

56. Home Political Department, June 1909, File no.3.(NAI).  
57. The Commonweal, 20 October 1916.
the price. It can be said that Annie Besant's manifold propaganda activities performed a helpful role in projecting India's case for Home Rule. Through deputations abroad, she presented the correct picture of the happenings in India and the nature of the British rule before the Crown Government and the British public, who were quite ignorant about these and growing Indian aspirations. It was chiefly on the basis of her support in England that she had calculated to launch her agitation in India. It was for this reason that Indians respected and entrusted their future in her hands.

The object of the Home Rule League was to bring about a change in Indian politics through constitutional means. Agitation and agitation alone, she said, had provoked the British bureaucracy to rescind the Bengal partition. Reminding the British that the cry for Home Rule was similar to the cry for partition of Bengal, Annie Besant pointed out:

The partition went, so will England understand a serious one pointed agitation for Home Rule by a political League. That means business and the kind of business with which England is familiar, and with which she on the whole is sympathetic.\(^5\)

She was of the opinion that constitutional agitation was no crime, it was a legitimate weapon, in the hands of the people to gain reforms.

England had used this weapon often and Britain of all the Nations in the world should not object to it as it had

\(^{58}\). *New India*, 16 December 1915.
\(^{59}\). *The Commonweal*, vol. 8, 21 September 1917, "The Outlook".

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itself gained freedom through this weapon only. She further warned the masses that unless "there was steady, firm and continuous agitation for self-government, before the war was over, the freedom of India would be put off for 60 generations." Time and again she reminded the Indians that "British politicians judge the value of claims by the energy of those who put them forward", and that is why during the Lucknow session of Congress in December 1916 HR Leaguers made it their point to show their strength. Arundale asked every member of the League to get themselves elected as a delegate to the Lucknow Session - the idea being quite simply to flood the Congress with HR Leaguers.

The success of Home Rule Leagues and their increasing popularity annoyed the British Government, and provoked it to take repressive measures. Result of this action was that Government, of Madras banned students from attending political meetings and the worse was the internment of Besant and her associates B.P. Wadia and George Arundale. This repressive action of the Government created a lot of tension which bore fruit in disguise because due to this Besant gained a lot of popularity. Government repression on agitators had diverse effects because they became more confident in their resolve to resist the Government. Regarding this Montagu has recorded in his Diary "...Shiva ...cut his wife into 52 pieces only to discover that he had 52 wives. This is really what happens to the Government of India when it interns 62 Mrs.Besant." Sensing the trouble that would brew up Besant

60. Home Political Deposit (A), November 1915, File no.166-168.
61. New India, 19 July 1915.
was released on September 1917. At this moment she was at the height of her popularity and on Tilak's suggestion was elected President of the Congress in December 1917.

Annie Besant's propaganda and invoked the admiration of her younger contemporaries namely Gandhi and Nehru. So inspiring and strong was Annie Besant's impact on Jawaharlal Nehru that on his return from England he remarked on the Indian state of affairs saying:

She was a powerful influence in adding to the confidence of the Hindu middle classes in their spiritual and national heritage .... The rising middle classes were politically inclined and were not so much in search of a religion; but they wanted some cultural roots to cling on to something that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced.

She greatly brought about awareness amongst the 'subject race' calling out religious symbols from the sacred texts of Hindus and instilling and infusing patriotism and the need for independence.

Annie Besant and Tilak

It would not be out of context here to mention about Tilak's Home Rule League as it shared its goal with Annie Besant's Home Rule League. As the Indian National Congress enjoyed the status of the most important political organisation, both Tilak and Annie Besant wanted to mobilise its support for the Home Rule movement.

After her entry into politics Annie Besant took the initiative of contacting Tilak and within a month or two their correspondence developed to the stage of proposing an interview. Tilak, promptly responded to her offer as it gave him an opportunity to "get back into the Congress which would serve both as a shield of respectability against renewed British prosecution and as a recruiting ground for potential followers." Mrs. Besant visited Pune a number of times with the aim of bringing Tilak to form a united front as Tilak had started his Home Rule League on 28 April 1916, six months before Annie Besant’s Home Rule League in September 1916. It was planned that both the Home Rule Leagues would work in coordination. While Besant’s Home Rule League would stir up agitation in the South and the Ganga valley, Tilak’s Home Rule League worked in a similar pattern in Maharashtra and Karnataka, the Central Province and Berar. It was strange why both the Leagues did not merge when both were working in the same direction. According to Annie "some of his followers disliked me and some

65. Home Political Proceedings, June 1916, File no. 36. According to the official report Tilak convened a conference of Nationalists at Poona and the Home Rule League was established on 28 April 1916 at Belgaum with the object of attaining self-government within the British Empire by all constitutional means and to educate and organise public opinion in the country towards the attainment of the same. For corroboration see Kesari, 1 May 1916.
of mine disliked him. We, however, had no quarrel with each other."

The obvious reason could only be that she feared Tilak's popularity as his League was more popular than hers. Moreover, Tilak linked up the question of Swaraj with the demands and needs of the people. Like Besant he did not just deliver lecture but also went deep into the villagers of Maharashtra to elevate the sufferings of the people and his spirit of sacrifice and identity with the rural people assigns him a higher rank than that of Besant.

Tilak avowed that the League may be regarded as a pioneer movement and not intended in any sense to be an external make up. The two leagues were meant to complement each other, though at times their actions were competitive. Both the leagues designed to spread the idea of Home Rule and generate public pressure for it. Both Tilak and Mrs. Besant in different ways mobilised the people, attaining Swaraj by glorifying Indian tradition and heritage, for restoring self-pride of Indians and arousing patriotic sentiments. Indian democratic thought developed in the late 19th century and early 20th century and many Indian radical nationalists turned to religion. This turn to religion came to be known as 'Hindu Nationalism' or 'Hindu Revivalism' Tilak felt that festivals united the Hindus on a platform of religious party and innocent gaiety. Commenting on them Tilak writes "the excellent arrangement for the melas ... the attractive dresses... , the parties marching in measured steps,

67. Maratha, 1 May 1916.
Theosophical Leaders at Adyar in 1894.
the delightful voice of the singers, the songs full of devotion, and the enthusiasm of the heroic zeal of our Maratha brethren. 68 Tilak started celebrating Shivaji and Ganapati festivals to strengthen the patriotic feelings of the people. Perhaps, he felt that festivals could carry political activities to the humblest cottages in the villages. But he was criticised for playing on the emotions of the people.

To bring the peasants in the fold of Congress in 1896 he organised and all-Maharashtra campaign to boycott foreign cloth to protest against the imposition of excise duty on cotton. Tilak was probably the first national leader to understand the important and significant role of the lower middle classes, artisans, peasants and workers in the national movement. In Kesari he wrote:

The country's emancipation can only be achieved by removing the clouds of lethargy and indifference which have been hanging over the peasants, who is the soul of India ... we must completely identify ourselves with the peasant ... only when this is done would 'the Government realise that to despise the Congress is to despise the Indian Nation' 69

Not only this he initiated a no tax campaign in Maharashtra in 1896-97 and asked famine stricken people of Maharashtra not to pay land revenue if their crops had failed. He gave expression to patriotism through his daily newspaper Kesari and Maratha.

68. Kesari, 18 September 1894.
Tilak believed in a generalized concept of the masses. For him the people were an undifferentiated mass. Since the only section of the Indians drawn in politics, at that time, were the petty bourgeois of the town, the upper strata of peasantry and a section of the petty landlords, to Tilak these people constituted the masses. Tilak was not a revivalist or a communalist, because though he used revivalism in the 1890's as a potent and powerful force to awaken the different sections of the people, and to impart to them confidence in themselves, at the same time he foresaw that revivalism had a tendency to become the master. He said "If we stick to religious or social prejudices and do not allow knowledge conducive to welfare enter our minds, we shall never rise."

He endorsed this point at the Lucknow Congress where he was criticised on the issue that in the Lucknow Pact too much had acceded to the Muslim League. Answering them Tilak had said "...I would not care if these rights are granted to any section of the Indian Community... when we have to fight against a third party - it is a very important thing that we stand on this platform united, united in race, united in religion, united as regards all different shades of political creed."

This evidently makes it clear that Tilak had no traces of regional or linguism and his demand for Home Rule was made wholly on

70. Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India (New Delhi, 1979), p.372.
71. B.G.Tilak His Speeches and Writings (Madras, n.d), pp.202-03.
a secular base. Both were unpopular with the British Government and understood British policies and conceded that the bureaucracy was shrewder than either of them and if they did not adopt the same shrewd approach they should have been, perhaps, perpetuating their disunion. Tilak in his speech at Kanpur Home Rule Conference dated 1.1.1917 stated: Home Rule is a synthesis of all the resolutions hitherto passed by the Congress during the last thirty years. Tilak was certainly guilty of spreading disaffection against British Rule. Tilak’s personal suffering during his long drawn political battle against the Raj were phenomenal. His fearlessness and selflessness infused courage in
the young generation.

To distinguish both the leagues, "Mrs Besant christened Tilak’s League as the All India Home Rule League in 1917" and her league as National Home Rule League. The goal of Tilak’s League was securing Swaraj for India. The entity of both these leagues as 'united front' lasted for a very short duration. Mrs. Besant, fearing the rising popularity of "Lokmanya" backed at this prospect because he captivated the imagination of the people and realized the evil of the existing system of Government. Thus her personal ambition came in the way of her long lasting rapport with Tilak. Thus he ventured on his own. He appointed Joseph Baptista, his legal adviser, and aide as President of his league. He himself took no official responsibility and gave fiery speeches calling for Swaraj in England as well as at home.

72. Ibid., pp. 223-24.
73. A.I.C.C. Papers, File no. 4/1920, p. 21v. (NMML)
His aim was to obtain for his people an increased and a gradual share of political authority and to subject the administration of the country to the control of the people.

Tilak's Home Rule League declined very fast because it lacked organisation and cohesiveness. Moreover, Tilak was a revolutionary and advocated passive resistance whereas Annie Besant was against violence, for her past experiences in England had taught her that agitation should not be violent or terrorist as it would invite the wrath of the British Government. Moreover towards the end of the year, he decided to go to England to pursue the libel case that he had filed against Valentine Chiril the author of Indian Unrest and was thus away for many critical months Besant was unable to give a firm lead and thus the movement, was left leaderless. This obviously proves that without Tilak's support Besant was lost in Indian politics and had no firm footing. Gandhi rightly remarked:

"The best of us, much younger in age, are unable to approach her in her industry, zeal or organising ability...she has devoted the best part of her mature life to the service of India and she has deservedly attained popularity in India second perhaps only to Tilak."

Gandhi had put his finger on the essential difference on the relative worth of the two leaders in the national movement.

Reason for the success of Home Rule League in Madras Presidency

While Tilak's role in the Home rule had been cut short (as already discussed) Annie Besant's influence in the Home Rule League continued to grow as she remained active in

this movement. The basic reason behind this was her strong roots in the Madras Presidency where she had launched Home Rule League movements. The regional pattern of politics help us to understand the larger context of the Home Rule movement at all India level. Thus she graduated from regional politics to the national politics. The Home Rule was largely successful in its home presidency because of the strong pre-existing "institutional network of Theosophical Lodges throughout the presidency which were issued to popularise the Home Rule branches." By September of 1917 there were 132 branches in Madras Presidency compared to 64 throughout the rest of India. Popularization of the league throughout Madras involved at times the publication of pamphlets in the regional languages of Tamil and Telugu. This represented a departure from previous nationalist activity, as the 'Madras Mahajan Sabha' and other similar political organizations had published material only in English. Mrs. Besant and her League received a great boost in popularity, when in June 1917 the Government of Madras interned her.

Another reason was the dominance of Brahmins in the Home Rule movement as her understanding of India's greatness was based on the great Sanskrit texts and consequently her appeal was to the Brahmins who spread her understanding of India which synchronised with Hindu Renaissance.

75. Annie Besant: Personal Papers 1914-15, File no.7A/C.(TSA)  
76. Home Political Department, File no. 63.(NAI)
Opposition to the Home Rule League

Her entry into politics irked many of her countrymen in India who had no doubt that her *New India* vilified everything British. It was deemed unpardonable for an English woman to propagate in a foreign country that the British rule was cruel and oppressive. From 1911 onwards, Mylapore's growing power in Madras created resentment among the Indian's Civil Service (ICS) officers and the Brahmins. The Mylapore connection represented not only the interest of a few western educated men but also of many magnets immediately powerful in society. For example the Kumar Maharaja of Vizianagaram, Raja of Ramnad, the 'Zamorin' of Calicut and the Gujarati banker Lord Govindoss, the Muslim Badasha family and the Calivalla brothers were all involved in the Home Rule League.

In 1916, for example, prominent Home Rule politicians "picked up the issue of emigrant labour and called on the Government to regulate more closely and, in some instances, stop completely the traffic". Besides the Home Rule League also functioned as a forum for coordinating the political interest with the economic ones. The economic forces when combined with the network of religious revivalism which Mrs. Besant, as a religious leader, was able to mobilise, gave the British every reason to see the Home Rule League as an extremely serious threat to the continued existence of the British "Raj". The editor of the *Madras Mail* harassed Mrs. Besant and her Brahmin

associates and urged the British Government to "deport her to England where she would have little or no effect on a public that was preoccupied by war". Inspite of the Government of India's eagerness of deporting her, they found themselves helpless which is evident from a letter to Lord Chamberlain, Secretary of State for India, dated 22 August 1916, saying "She will be a great nuisance and you will remember we cannot exercise the same control over her action in this country as is possible in India."

Hence, she was not sent to England. The point of dispute between the Home Government and the colonial bureaucracy in India was whether Home Rule was constitutional or unconstitutional. Chelmsford in his notes writes:

I am prepared ... to consent to summary action being taken against Mrs. Besant, Tilak and such like, if a clear case against them is made. But as things stand, it seems to me impossible on paper to draw a distinction between the self Government which we advocate as the ultimate goal of British rule in India, and Home Rule as advocated by Mrs. Besant and Tilak. 80

Sir Reginald Craddock, Home Member argued that the demand for Home rule was revolutionary and hence unconstitutional. He further explained that Tilak and Besant would "soon work up the feeling that anything short of Home Rule at the end of war would be a justification for violent agitation and this would sooner or later lead to actual violence". That is why he felt that 

"this rising Home Rule ardour requires to be damped". To which

78. Madras Mail, 29-30 August 1917.
79. Chelmsford Papers, Reel 1, p.224,(NMML).
80. Chelmsford Papers, 1 February 1917,(NMML).
81. Home Political Department, File no.25 December 1916, Craddock notes 23 November 1916 and Chelmsford, 4 December 1916. also in Home Political Department, File no. 291-294.
Chelmsford replied: "I am not prepared to consider the deportation of Mrs. Besant at the Present moment. A stronger case must be brought than any shown to me hitherto."

Craddock and local Government in India requested a clarification of policy. The Government of India realized that it was unavoidable and thus in March 1917 issued an explanatory circular. Craddock in reply wrote for:

firm discouragement of Home Rule Campaign. Methods were to be chosen locally, within certain limits. Governments were to try to persuade individuals to eschew the movement, and were to provide special protection for the young. If necessary they were to use the executive powers provided by Lord Hardinge's Wartime Defence if India Act, even to the extent of precensorship of political writings. But they were to check extravagant assertions, not the constitutional advocacy of reforms.

The contents of the circular were deliberately kept ambiguous. Indians were warned that early Home Rule should be put entirely out of mind while they did not define the time frame of 'early'. The Government wanted to end Home Rule agitation and yet protect the right to advocate reform. The circular was criticised by the Government of India for its willful ambiguity arguing that it "did not propose any policy." But Craddock insisted to rule out Home Rulers. Regarding Home Rule Movement he

82. Ibid.
83. Home Political Department File no.300, July 1916; Secretary; Foreign and Political Department, to Chelmsford, 20 July 1917.
84. Viceroy (Home Department) to Secretary of State, 12 August 1917, Home Political Department File no. 635, November 1917.
85. Home Political Department File no.298, Home Department Circular 20 March 1917; also in Home Political Department File no.25, September 1917.
said "it is in my opinion, seditious for it aims at revolution and not evolution." But the new Home Member replacing Craddock, remarked that agitators could not be repressed until they broke the law and that it was impossible to ban Home Rule meetings when "Home Rule has been defined by the Government of India as a legitimate goal." But the Governors and the local Government of the British in India wanted a general ban on Home Rule for they feared a mass agitation. They wished to redefine legitimate political activity so as to exclude what the Congress and Muslim League called 'educative propaganda'. To control this they firmly followed the traditional method of controlling agitation by suppressing objectionable speeches and writings. This makes it obvious that the Government of India was quite confused and uncertain as to what approach to take towards H.R. movement. At last the Government decided to take punitive measures against Annie Besant. They demanded a security of Rs. 2000 from Annie Besant in May 1916. At the same time a security of Rs. 5000 was demanded from her Vasanta Press. Besant raised a great hue and cry over it, which alarmed the Madras and Bombay Governments and they issued an order forbidding her entry. The more the British tried to repress her, the more determined she became "to win freedom from tyranny."

In June 1916 Bombay Government prohibited Besant from entering the Presidency. Chelmsford explained to the Viceroy Chamberlain: "I hate all this suppression but India is in too inflammable a state.... If she misbehaves further, the Madras

87. Ibid., 29 March 1917, 29 March 1917.
89. Home Political Department. File no. 638, November 1917.
90. New India, 10 July 1916.
Government will be asked to place her ... out of communication with her paper and politics...." Madras Government awaited such news. They had wanted to deport Besant in October 1915 but Hardinge's Government had preferred to wait. In February 1916 when Besant failed to capture the Congress, Hardinge told Madras Government to take action and they took action under the Press Act of 1910.

Internment

On 16 June 1917 Besant and her two associates were interned. Madras Government acted on their own authority following the general instructions of the March Home Rule Circular. Chelmsford's Government subsequently gave their approval. They had not inspired the internments, they told the Secretary of State, but they had been on the point of suggesting that some action be taken. The Home Rule Campaigns, the Madras Government alleged excited racial feelings and promoted animosity against the alien Government. Chelmsford felt that Besant was following a "policy of vilification of the Government, hoping to raise an agitation which might culminate in bloodshed." While Madras Government openly claimed that Besant was advocating violence.

But the chief reason for the Government's hatred towards Besant was that they feared her growing influence. The I.C.S. men tended to see the H.R.L. as a danger not only to the Government

91. Chelmsford Papers, File no.3., Chelmsford to Chamberlain 16 June and 24 July 1917.
92. Home Political Department A, File no. 454-457, February 1916; see also Home Political Department, File no. 133, January 1916.
93. Home Political Department A, File no.299-310, June 1916.
94. Home Political Department A, File no.36-53, October 1916 and Home Political Department, File no 62, June 1917.
for which they worked, but also to themselves, and their social position. The Madras I.C.S. officers joined the non-Brahmin category and opposed Annie Besant.

At this crucial time B.G. Horniman, editor of the Bombay Chronicle, Shankarlal Banker, Sarojini Naidu and Jamnadas Dwarkadas approached Gandhi for help in 1917 in securing the release of Annie Besant. Gandhi's protest against Annie's internment had special significance, because he had already earned the respect and affection of his countrymen for his novel strategy of fight i.e. Satyagraha against the racial policies of the South African Government. The Bombay Chronicle dated 24.10.16 stated that Gandhi lodged a strong protest against her internment. He said:

... there were three grounds on which they should stand by Mrs. Besant viz. gallantry, pity and self-interest .... The question of self interest lay in the fact that they wanted Mrs. Besant in their Presidency because nobody could carry on agitation better than she.

When all this was going on at one hand, on the other hand H.R.L. posed a threat to the non-Brahmins in Madras who formed the Justice Party (1917) "They accused her of having fermented the non-Brahmin movement by identifying herself with Brahmins and by attacking us incessantly" To Mrs. Besant what mattered most

95. Interview with Shankarlal Banker, Oral History Transcription, p.12.(NMML).
97. The objectives of the Justice Party were as follows:
1. To promote the educational, social, economic, political material and moral progress of all communities in Southern India other than the Brahmins.
2. To make timely representation to the Govt. on matters affecting the interest of non-Brahmins.
3. To educate the people on the need of such an organisation and to mould public opinion in the favour of the party.
4. The party was averse to any violent and sudden constitutional change.
98. Non-Brahmin, 6 May 1917 (Madras).
was gaining HR, which she clearly indicated in her article 'How to Win Liberty'. She writes:

If Brahmans and non-Brahmins cannot live together in Madras in peace, how can you expect a United Nation? I believe that India is able to win Home Rule, strong enough to do it, ready to do it, if it is only possible to hold this great movement in check so that we could turn to ways of swift reform instead of turning aside into the supposed non-violent inaction which would inevitably break into violence.

That was why Government suppressed the H.R. movement for its aspirations and not for its method. Once again the Government of India was wavering on its decisions whether to release Besant or not. Pentland the Governor of Madras decided that it would be unsafe to release Besant. Montagu sent as telegram strongly urging a reversal of this decision, as he wished to avoid on impending debate on the subject in Parliament. Chelmsford insisted that the Madras Government re-considered and thus on 17 September she was released. It can be fairly concluded that Montagu played a vital part in releasing Besant. Montagu in House of Commons statement said that the Indian Government had acted on their own responsibility. It is important to note that many factors helped in the release of Besant. First that the new Home Member replacing Craddock was Sir William Vincent whom Chelmsford had chosen as a "strong man who would speak his mind and who was persona grata with Indians" Moreover he was absent on special duty between October 1917 and February 1918 when the

99. New India, 19 October 1920.
100. Home Political Department, File no. 316, September 1917 and File no. 133, January 1918.
101. Montagu Papers, File no.16, Montagu to Willingdon 3 August and 9 September 1920.
102. Chelmsford Papers, File no.2, Chelmsford to Chamberlain & June and 6 October 1918.
new policy persisted. Secondly intervention of Jinnah who was then a member in the Imperial Legislative Council also had some influence. He undertook to encourage Besant to moderation if she were released and to disavow her if she again preached violence. Actually Jinnah’s offer convinced Chelmsford that many of the politicians disliked Besant and "would be glad to see her disappear.”

Besant’s release represented Government of India’s decision to treat the Home Rule movement as a political and constitutional, rather than a revolutionary agitation.

Decline of Home Rule League

As a result of country wide agitation, the British Government could not afford to ignore the popular public opinion and released her. Soon after her release she was made the President of the Congress in 1917. Although Home Rule League made her popular but it began to develop cracks. It was an ironical situation because on one hand she became the President of Indian National Congress and on the other hand Home Rule League began to develop cracks and finally its disintegration. During this phase of chaos the Indians turned their minds away from the Parliamentary action to hostile direct action. Gandhi’s launching of Non-Co-operation (NCO) on 9 April 1920 added fuel to fire. Moreover, Mrs. Besant had just three months to educate the people against NCO movement which was spreading like wild fire.

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103. Chelmsford Papers, File no. 3, Chelmsford to Montague, 8 August 1917.
From 1918-19 Mrs. Besant found herself isolated from the Indian National Congress. She and the groups from other provinces, which were similar in ambition to Mylapore, found it impossible to control the Congress and turn it from a wild agitational organisation into one capable of rational discussion with the British. On account of her aggressive manipulation, she became the object of as much hatred as she had once been in adulation. Her Mylapore type supporters (on whose advice and supports she was relying) only risked their own careers by remaining an institution which was in the hands of their enemies and committed to policies they could not accept. They withdrew from the Congress and formed a "Moderate Conference" away from the "turmoil of agitation." Within a year majority of the men of Mylapore had defected from the Congress. "Mrs. Besant herself returned to Madras and attempted to revive Home Rule League only to find that it too was in the hands of Kasturi Ranga Iyengar." She formed a separate National Home Rule League but it never acquired a "serious following". By mid 1919 she was no longer of any consequence, and the Madras Congress was firmly under Kasturi Ranga Iyengar's control. By 1920 he even forced Mylapore and the Besantines out of the harmless Madras Mahajan Sabha. Indeed by early 1920 Mylapore, the archfiend of the Home Rule League had become the most loyal supporter of the continuation of the British connection.

104. Hindu, 27,29 July 1918.
106. Ibid.
The reason for her aversion to agitation and politics can be better understood in context with her return to the Moderate camp. The Moderates felt uneasy and reluctant to join passive resistance movement. Besides, her desire to keep the national movement united accounted for her becoming indifferent to politics. There were many reasons for her indifference. Firstly the Moderate who joined the HR movement after Besant's arrest were convinced after her release that the British were responsive to Indian demands and that more could be achieved by moderate traditions rather than by agitation. Secondly the talk of Civil disobedience put them off so completely that they did not attend Congress from September 1918 onwards. Lastly the publication of the scheme of Government reforms in July 1918 further divided the two stream of thinkers. Mrs. Besant was quite confused at times, she would disavow passive resistance and at times under pressure from her younger followers, would agree to it. May be, due to old age she became infirm in her decision or could be, that her nerves were shaken, after the traumatic experience of internment and may be, now she feared to rouse the anger of the British. This can lucidly be seen when initially alongwith Tilak she considered the Government reforms 1918 as unworthy and later argued in favour of acceptance.

Moreover by now political climate had turned favourable to the Extremists. Moderate leadership was rejected and The Justice Party had become dominant in the Madras politics.
Though the Home Rule League declined, it had helped to shape the future national movement. The end of Home Rule League did not mean the end of her concern and interest in the political affairs of India. From 1922-27, she laboured hard and concentrated on the drafting of the Commonwealth of India Bill in which many prominent leaders co-operated whole-heartedly. However, certain developments in the Indian policies obliged her to change her mind about her active participation in politics. For example, the non-inclusion of her name among the delegates for the First Round Table Conference in London 1930 upset her and made her resign her membership from the Congress.

To sum it up it may be said that the Home Rule League movement created a generation of ardent nationalists who would form the backbone of the national movement in the coming years. It also created organizational links between town and country which were to prove invaluable in later years. It also generated a wide spread pro-nationalist atmosphere in the country. The stage was set for Gandhi's entry, who, when giving a call for a Satyagraha to protest against Rowlatt Act, was the rallying point for all those who had been inducted into politics by the Home Rule Movement.

It can be concluded in the words of Achut Patwardhan, a leading Socialist, (who had worked with both Annie Besant and Gandhi in the year before 1947), said that she had passed the baton of political leadership in the hands of Gandhiji. He said the "politics is like a great field where a runner runs a set distance in the relay race and then passes the baton to the next athlete."

It would not be wrong to say that Mrs. Besant largely paved the way for the emergence of Gandhi. This is better explained in the next chapter.