Chapter VIII
Besant and Gandhi
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BESANT AND GANDHI

No comparison of Mrs. Besant and M.K. Gandhi, however, has yet been published in my knowledge. In understanding this comparative analysis of their lives and ideas, I have not tried to duplicate in detail the more ambitious biographers of the either leader, but I have made a comparative study on the basis of a variety of available sources listed in the references and bibliography. My primary concern has been to understand the interaction and influence mutually exerted by their lives and ideas on each other and by the parties and platforms within India's nationalist movement which they came to represent because of their protracted personal and public contact and the unique influence attained by each of them over the thoughts and actions of substantial segments of their countrymen. I feel that every study focussed exclusively on the life or ideas of Mrs. Besant and Gandhi alone has presented only a part of the picture of the motivation for the actions and thoughts of the either, and of their impact on Indian History. For a well-rounded appreciation, therefore, comparative analysis not only of the ideas and actions of both the leaders but also of their roles in Indian history seemed desirable to me.

The two great public figures Mrs. Besant and Gandhi, one hailing from the West and the other from the East, seemed to have some basic difference in their approach towards the same goal. Mrs. Besant, a woman in her sixties and Gandhi, a man in his
forties, had made their way up. Both being imbued with a religious spirit were full of originality, universal outlook and of course upright and honest views on religion, society and politics. Both respected each other highly and yet they were incompatible in their temperament. They were two great personalities so strong that it was really not possible for them to work together and each had to have the whole field to himself or herself, if he or she were to do anything worthwhile.

Mrs. Besant was an Irish lady whereas Gandhi purely belonged to the Indian soil. This was one major difference. Moreover, Mrs. Besant always spoke in English and she was a world-renowned orator. On the contrary Gandhi was rather calm and soft-spoken. In India he spoke mainly in his native Gujarati or in Hindi. That was the time when people of India were clamouring for Swadeshi and in Gandhi they found a Swadeshi nationalist whereas Mrs. Besant, they thought, was a foreigner.

**Similarities in Life Pattern and Career of both the Personalities**

Mrs. Besant was born in London in 1847 and Gandhi was born in Kathiawad (Gujrat) in 1869. The difference in age between these two personalities was twenty one years. Though both Buddha and Christ were great teachers and prophets, their personalities and approaches were totally different. The same can be said about these two Massihas of India's freedom, Mrs. Annie Besant
and Mohan Dass Karam Chand Gandhi. Since both of them belonged to entirely different races, colours, creeds, moulds and even sex to expect total similarity from them would be expecting rather too much.

Gandhi and Besant shared their fascination for theosophy. Gandhi too was attracted towards theosophy at the end of his second year in England where two of his theosophist friends, who were brothers and unmarried, pressed him, to become a theosophist. They even introduced him to Mrs. Besant. Gandhi wrote "I never became a member, as I had my differences, but I came in close contact with almost every theosophist."2

They had a lot in common. Both were strict vegetarians and spoke on the non-injury to animals and living beings. This is best explained by reading Gandhi's letter to Jamnadas Gandhi on July 19, 1913 where he writes "If, through ignorance or oversight, eggs have been used in Mrs. Besant's food, she vomits it."3 Gandhi too, laid stress on simple diet of fresh fruits and nuts. Later, Gandhi formulated this into a principal theory of non-violence which became the basis of his political creed. Referring to cruelty towards animals Mrs. Besant said:

It is the daily duty of each of you, whenever you see an act of cruelty, to stop and remonstrate with the man who has done it, and try to persuade him rather than threaten him.4

2. Ibid., p.194.
Not only this, she made the Theosophists take a pledge every morning that they will stop, or do their best to stop any act of cruelty towards animals. Gandhi also rebuked the people for their cruelty towards animals by saying that "the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man."

Search for truth was one common goal between Mrs. Besant and Gandhi. Both stood for truth and gave it the utmost importance. Gandhi expounded his conviction for truth saying:

I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded be my very life... But as long as I have not realised this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it.

Both believed in simplicity. Gandhi, by his ability to live and feel like the poor, won their appreciation. His austere living, simple food and dress was able to make him come close to the people. Moreover, he talked to them in their own idioms and translated his message in terms of their daily needs. Gandhi’s dress, which he said, represented the country’s poverty gained

5. Ibid., p.281.
him a lot of popularity. Similarly Mrs. Besant, clad in a white silk sari, won for herself the adorable title of "Vasanta Mata" or "Bari Mem Sahib". Both left their countries. Interestingly enough both these stalwarts of Indian politics, started their battle against British imperialism on the soils of the nations other than their own. Gandhi went to South Africa and revolted against the racial policy of the Britishers whereas Mrs. Besant finally chose India to take up cudgels on behalf of the Indians struggling against the imperialist Britain. Though Gandhi returned to the country of his origin in 1899 to carry on the struggle, Mrs. Besant stayed in India till her last. She was highly qualified academically and had set up an economic base for herself. At the same time she was roused by her spiritual insights to play a bigger role than the one, she played within her own country.

Interestingly, both the veterans got their initial training in countries other than their native land. Mrs. Besant was fighting in England for the rights and privileges of her own Irish people there, whereas Gandhi did the same for the coloured indentured labour population in South Africa. Both fought against the British but at different platforms and in different countries. In the early 1920's Gandhi, twenty two years younger than her, was in a more advantageous position as a national leader in his own country. What Annie had done for her country Ireland before landing in India was not known but what Gandhi had done in South Africa before his return to India was certainly well known to Indians and highly admired by them. This helped Gandhi to gain an early foothold in Indian political arena.
Moreover on Gokhale's (his political Guru) advice and also in pursuance of his style of politics he did not take a political stand on any political issue in his first year but spent all his time travelling, observing people and in organising his band of followers and Sabarmati Ashram. This was one of his reason for keeping aloof from Home Rule Movement. Another being Annie Besant's policy to agitate for Home Rule when the British were in trouble due to First World War.

Views on Indian Society, Culture, Tradition and Education

What was their attitude toward the West? Gandhi and Besant both reminded the Indians oft and on, in their speeches about the baneful effects of aping the West. He observed:

My resistance to Western civilisation is really a resistance to its indiscriminate and thoughtless imitation based on the assumption that Asians are fit only to copy everything that comes from the West.9

His major worry was that since his countrymen had no clear idea of the central principles and weaknesses of their civilisation they did not know what to borrow and remained vulnerable to passing fashions and crude or subtle pressure of the colonial rules. But all the same Gandhi, was a strong proponent of

cross-cultural borrowing. He borrowed several important ideas from Christian thinkers, Tolstoy and Ruskin. His Hinduism acquired a deep Christian orientation. Mrs. Besant, on the other hand was a traditionalist who shared the belief that nothing discovered by the European nations, be it in the science, politics, ideology of religion, was in fact unknown to the ancient Hindus. There was a basic difference in their approach towards religion and culture. Gandhi was highly moved by the dedication of the Christian missionaries and had deep faith in Christianity. He said "There have been many times when I did not know which way to turn. But I have gone to the Bible, and particularly the New Testament and have drawn strength from its message."

Annie however, made no secret of her aversion for Christianity. In her Autobiography Annie wrote "I used every weapon that history, science, criticism, scholarship, could give me against the Churches." Annie's personal experiences estranged her from Christianity specially after her marriage to Frank Besant. It was further hardened by the English marriage law (which was influenced by Christianity) to provide her divorce. She writes "The Old Testament does not proscribe it—except in the case of bishops and decons—ecclesiastical Christianity has generally been in favour of monogamy; at the

same time, both the New Testament and the Church have insisted on the inferiority of the female sex: wives, submit yourselves into your own husbands, your women... are commanded to be under obedience.” Her antipathy towards Christianity can be well judged further from an extract of her article published in January 1885:

Christian charity? We know its work. It gives a hundred - weight of coal and five pounds of beef once a year to a family whose head could earn a hundred such doles if Christian justice allowed him fair wage for the work he performs. It plunders the workers...14

Interestingly Gandhi, who was moved much by the Christian faith did not adopt and embrace Christianity for he explains:

I was tremendously attracted to Christianity, but eventually, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your Scriptures that we had not got in ours and that to be a good Hindu also meant that I would be a good Christian. He further held that “Jesus cannot be the only begotten son of God.” He admitted that Jesus was a great teacher of humanity but not the

13. Annie Besant, Marriage as it was, as it is and as it should be, (London, 1882), p. 8 2nd ed.
only begotten Son of God. Regarding Hinduism Gandhi writes

"Hinduism ...entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being and
I find a solace in the Bhagvadgita and Upanishad that I miss even
in the Sermon on the Mount." He claimed the Bhagvadgita as the
spiritual reference book in his daily life. "It has become for
me the key to the scriptures of the world and it unravels for me,
the deepest mysteries to be found in them."

Annie was also greatly moved by Bhagvadgita and felt that
its teaching embraced the sense of social duty which she was
determined to arouse in Indians. According to her, the central
lesson of the Gita was that spiritual man need not be a recluse:
"that union with the divine life may be achieved and maintained
in the midst of worldly affairs."

Regarding missionaries, their zeal appealed to Gandhi but he
objected to the manner, method and motive of these missionaries
in carrying out the mission of conversion. He implied that they
wore cloaks of virtue to spread Christianity. Behind this
missionary enterprise was the Church arrogance, the assumption
that there are people who lack certain things which it must
supply whether they want them or not. Besant also found

17. Young India, 5 August 1925.
18. Harijan, 18 April 1936
19. Annie Besant (trans), The Bhagvad Gita (n.p, 1895)
missionaries very ruthless in conversion and found Hinduism most tolerant. She was an ardent believer in the \textit{Karma} theory, the philosophy of \textit{Yoga}, the \textit{Sankhya} and of the transmigration of the soul.

In the field of education both had a lot in common as they both realised that foreign conquest had brought to end the creative past of Indian educational thought. After a long period of decline and stagnation the 19th century upsurge throughout the world was also felt in India though in a different form and shape. India witnessed remarkable developments in her socio-political thought during this period. Both he and Mrs. Besant laid stress on broadening the mental horizon of students. Towards the second quarter of the 19th century, the hypnotic spell of foreign civilization began to recede slowly but steadily before a rising wave of self-consciousness of the mighty movements of socio-religious reforms sprang up, one after the other, to resuscitate the ancient culture of India and lead her once more to evolve a glorious future. Her contribution substantially to the revival of Hinduism through Theosophical schools and colleges, translation of Hindu sacred texts into English, her matchless eloquence and writing were remarkable. This was of special importance in South India where there was an absence of revivalist organisations like the Arya Samaj or the Ramakrishana Mission.

Mrs. Besant was searching for a 'golden age' of the past for India. She urged the people to 'look back to the past', and gain
from the past, knowledge and experience." She was a traditionalist and strove to maintain "the immemorial customs and follow the immemorial traditions, instead of trying to look as little Hindu as possible." While Gandhi too came under the influence of tradition. He was emotionally a simple theistic Hindu, with absolute faith in God. He wrote "I am surer of His existence than of the fact that you and I are sitting in this room." He was more concerned with reinterpreting traditions, customs and usages in the light of the needs of the modern age. He believed in renovating tradition. He upheld the traditions, yet at the same time pruned and recast them. For Mrs. Besant, Hindu tradition was a binding structure of beliefs, deriving its authority from its ancient lineage; for Gandhi it was a "scientific theory, the authority of a tradition was located in its experimental validation and was subject to revision."

Gandhi used the traditions in a creative way. He evolved two popular symbols 'salt' and 'the spinning-wheel' which helped him to involve women in his fight against imperialism and capitalism.

Mrs. Besant, on the other hand, could not evolve any popular symbols. Believing that rediscovery of their past culture by itself could help the Indian people in unfolding the inner spiritual man and liberating the nation from West’s cultural influence and political slavery, she appealed to the people to return to their cultural roots.

Both Mrs. Besant and Gandhi hated the caste system. Gandhi too hated untouchability. He said “I think we are committing a great sin in treating a whole class of people as untouchables and it is owing to the existence of this class that we have still some revolting practices among us.” In Mrs. Besant’s opinion caste system was a harmful institution, which should be destroyed, ‘not merely reformed’ and advocated practising of inter-caste and inter-racial association-dinning and wedding.

Perhaps it was this stand of hers that encouraged George Arundale to marry Rukmini Devi and her lieutenants C.Jinarajadasa to marry Dorothy Graham. She sympathised with the cause of untouchables and in fact opened Panchama schools. She made a great effort to educate the people, to treat untouchables and touchables as equals. Thus Gandhi carried on, with what had already been started by Mrs. Besant and gave it the shape of a large scale and powerful movement. Though she worked for the upliftment of the caste system yet, she never worked for its total breakdown. Infact, she fully supported the upper caste Brahmans. She found a strong foothold among the Brahmans and that is why she over glorified India’s past. While Gandhi believed in equality, which prompted him to breakdown the caste system she, wanted to raise

25. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.13, p.120.
standards through leadership by an elite, because they were the people who were within her reach. She even became a controversial figure in South Indian politics due to her support to the brahmin caste. I feel, it did not strike her to learn the spoken language of the people for knowledge of the common language would have made her come closer to the masses.

Gandhi analysed the root cause of the nature of women’s oppression. He said “It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide.” That is why he criticised Tulsidas for writing in Ramcharitamanas that the drum, the fool, the Shudra, the animal and the woman—all need beating. He held Tulsidas chiefly responsible for promoting the sad state of women. This aptly reveals that Gandhi did not blindly follow the traditions and rejected the religious doctrines that did not appeal to his reason. He was convinced that India could not tackle its current crisis without reconstructing itself. He wanted to give to his country a new Shasra or Smriti, as he felt, that “we need not assume that all our Shastras have been written after careful thinking and from knowledge.” This aspect of Shastras was overlooked by Besant. She failed to do so, may be, because she did not want to alienate her orthodox Brahmin followers and colleagues. This creative approach to tradition has been overlooked by Mrs. Besant in

context with the women's question. Gandhi viewed some of the
social customs as a means of oppressing women. Child marriage,
child widows, purdah, sati, dowry, prostitution he believed were
the products of customs. Regarding the question of women the
custom of child marriage was, according to Gandhi, one of the
glaring social evils oppressing the Indian womanhood. Gandhi
felt that the presence of thousands of widows in any society was
a serious menace. It was like "sitting on a mine which may
explode at any moment." He felt that widows should be allowed
and encouraged to remarry. Mrs. Besant, too, was in favour of
remarriage of widows and felt that the lot of widows (unwilling
to remarry) might be changed by making them willing helpers of
their sex, by training them as teachers and as nurses, and by
thus making widowhood a consecration to the service of
humanity. Both saw "voluntary enlightened widowhood" as a great
social asset and believed that a real Hindu widow was a
treasure. He felt that widows could perform more useful
service to humanity but if they cannot restrain themselves
"they... should have the freedom to remarry without incurring any
odium." Like Gandhi, Mrs. Besant also attributed the increase
in the number of child widows to the custom of marriage at a very
tender age. Gandhi, of course, explored this issue in a greater
dept than her.

29. Young India, 5 August 1926; also in Collected Works of
31. Young India, 2 September 1926.
32. Young India, 23 September 1926; also in Collected Works of
Since the question of women's oppression was linked to social and national health, Gandhi felt that the age of consent in the Sarda Act should be raised to 16 or even 18. Here again both shared common views on this issue. According to Dr. Kannan, one of the committed theosophist, Mrs. Besant in 1925 made all the theosophists take a pledge called the 'Stalwart Pledge' that they would not marry their daughters before their attaining 16 years of age. They also pledged not to take any dowry and not to waste money through ostentatious expenditure. The oppressive custom of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. He said "it was an excellent thing for girls to remain unmarried for the sake of service". He told the girls to remain spinsters if they failed to get a suitable match "rather than to be humiliated and dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry".

Needless to say, that Mrs. Besant created awareness among women and also an organisational structure which could provide a forum for their interaction, as well as, expose them to associational activities and finally lead them onwards towards their emancipation through the W.I.A. Mrs. Besant created awareness among women for their rights. However, it was Gandhi who helped them to find a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new self view and a consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression. The women's movement in India was an integral part of the nationalist politics of Gandhi. Undoubtedly the women's movement in India remained confined to the upper classes, but Gandhi pushed away all opposition and encouraged women from

lower segments in urban and rural areas also to participate in
the national struggle and that was the "real secret of his
appeal."

Gandhi's unique moral stature silenced orthodox opposition
to women's participation in public activity. Owing to the
implicit social sanction, leaders of women's movement were able
to further organize associations to fight for the fundamental
rights of Indian women. Thus efforts of a number of public
leaders and organizations in pre-independence days laid a sound
foundation for women's increasing participation in public life as
autonomous individuals. The Bombay Chronicle dated 7.4.1919
wrote about Gandhi's speech at Bombay that "...the Indian body
would not be able to do its work properly if one half of it,
namely, the women, remained inactive, and so he would appeal to
his sisters of India to join the Satyagraha movement in large
numbers." Mrs. Besant initiated the entry of women into
politics by making them aware of their political rights and also
felt that women should participate in the Home Rule movement.
The strength of the Home Rule Movement she felt:

is rendered tenfold greater by the adhesion to it of large
numbers of women, who bring to its help the incalculating
heroism, the endurance, the self sacrifice of the feminine
nature.37

Both these national leaders had their different views on the

35. Transcript of Interview with Smt. Hansa Mehta, File
no.41.(NMML)
36. Collected Works of Gandhi, vol.15,p.189; also in The
Bombay Chronicle, 7 April 1919.
relative importance of English and Indian vernacular languages. It is an accepted fact that language is a means of communication, a potent means of linking people together. It also bears powerful emotional overtones and transmits shared culture, as it conjures up the myths and shared historical experiences it records and celebrates in song a story, whether in written or oral form. With the Britishers came English language, which became the language of administration and higher education. Thus, English became a cultural carrier. However, it was a controversial issue. Gandhi's advocacy for the use of English, instead of vernacular languages could be traced to the year, when he returned from South Africa. Gandhi said, our language is the reflection of ourselves and if you tell me that our languages are too poor to express the best thoughts, then I say that the sooner we are wiped out of existence, the better for us?

Once Besant showed her regret to Gandhi on conducting Indian National Congress Proceedings in Hindustani. Gandhi answered that it was better to use Hindustani than English. Referring to the people of Madras Presidency Gandhi argued that "due to 38 million inhabitants of Madras Presidency why the rest of India should learn English." He further wrote:

If the audience was weary of Mrs. Besant it was not because it was indifferent or disrespectful to her but because it could not follow her speech, interesting and able though it was. And as national consciousness develops and as the appetite for political knowledge and education grows, as it must, it will become more and more difficult and rightly so, for a speaker no matter how able and popular, to command the attention of a popular audience if he spoke in English.

39. Young India, 20 January, 1920
Mrs. Besant's stress that English should be "learnt as a language only and not used as a medium of instruction" is apt for she fully realized her inability to express her views without the people understanding her and the incomplete knowledge of India if they did not know the language.

Annie Besant in a lecture, delivered in Bombay in 1903, said "Education must be founded on a knowledge of the country as well as of its present. It must be designed in accordance with the ancient traditions and national habits and adapted to modern necessities..." She further said that "education founded on the needs of western life is mischievous." She established a number of national schools all over the country apart from the few colleges like the one at Madnapalle and, of course, the Benaras University. Even Gandhi, at a very early age, realised that education was the only remedy for all ills and evils with which India had been afflicted for centuries. He found that education was the only means of India's salvation. The present system of education in India was of foreign import and was not suited to the genius and culture of the people and hence a radical overhaul to suit the needs of society was over due.

42. Ibid., p.16.
43. Ibid., p.112.
He believed further that individuals should be educated by means of vocational manual training. This is the most important feature of Gandhi's educational philosophy. He believed that the child's education should be started by teaching him a useful handicraft and enabling him to produce from the moment he begins his training. For, according to him, the highest development of the mind and the soul was possible only under such a system of education. For that matter all subjects were to be taught through a vocation. However, the handicraft was to be taught not mechanically but scientifically. "The handicraft should, besides developing the personality of the child, make education self-supporting." Moreover he stressed on the adoption of "mother tongue as the medium of instruction". He felt that Hindi should be included in the "curriculum of school for the simple reason that it is spoken by about 220 million people" and it would further reduce the financial burden of the people as English books were very expensive.

Both Mrs. Besant and Gandhi shared common views about educational philosophy i.e. free and compulsory education for seven years, emphasis on mother tongue; to afford opportunity to practise civic virtues in school. In order to be a member of a democratic state, the students must learn the art of discipline and self-government.

46. Ibid., p 40.
Both laid more emphasis on cultural aspect of education than the literary. "Culture" according to Gandhi "was the foundation, the primary thing which everybody especially girls ought to be taught," for culture was not the "product of intellectual work but the quality of soul, permeating all aspects of human behaviour." Gandhi believed that the highest aim of education was a knowledge of God and self-realization. He, therefore, maintained that religious education of the youth should be held as necessary as secular instruction. This did not mean instruction of any sectarian religion, but formulated by Gandhi much later, were present in the educational philosophy of Mrs. Besant which bore the stamp of social dynamism in an idealistic mould. She was very mindful of the educational needs of the rural people. She conceived of a village school which would cater to the needs of the poor village community. In her scheme of education, the rural basis was quite evident, when she asserted that the village school must reflect the rural surroundings. She said "Teach in the village school handicraft and agriculture." Annie felt that all subjects taught must be duly co-related to the flora and fauna of the place. She advocated the introduction of village craft such as agriculture, carpentry and weaving in schools according to the local needs of the community. She underlined the need of establishing different types of High Schools such as Commercial, Technical, Arts and Agricultural High Schools. The Agricultural High Schools, she argued should offer subjects which have special relevance to the

48. Ibid.
rural life and the agricultural occupations, with special emphasis on the teaching of simple chemistry, on the nature of soils and the suitable manures. She felt that "...a generation of really educated people will change the face of India." Similarly Gandhi also said that the school should "create an attachment for village life, for village crafts, for open air independence and for service among our own."

Both Gandhi and Annie collaborated with each other for some time. On May 14, 1917 Annie Besant sought his help in formulating a comprehensive scheme of education to substitute the British Government education system which was crushing people's patriotism and their sense of pride in the country.

Being a great admirer of ancient India, rich in her great traditions in education system of Ashrams and Gurukulas, Annie Besant wanted to revive all those traditions so that the youth of the country may be sensitised to the great cultural past. While she encouraged people to transmit the spiritual treasures for the benefit of the troubled humanity, she was equally conscious of the needs of modern society. Therefore, she emphasized the need of educating the Indian youth in such a way that they might stand on their own legs and meet the challenge of various life situations.

Both stressed on students to be Brahmachari and did not favour students involvement in politics. Gandhi said "Student should study Politics, but should not be active participators".

50. Ibid.
He said that a *brahachari* was a man who had "control of the senses in thought, word and deed."

Both stressed on the need of religious education. Gandhi said, that religion in education will give direction, purpose and goal to human life. Even Besant said, that Religion was necessary as it was the necessary basis for Morality, Art and Literature. She reminded the Indians that religion was a unifying force which would make India free, prosperous and mighty.

**Views on British Rule: Besant and Gandhi**

Both Gandhi and Annie believed that the English had not taken India; the Indians had given it to them. Gandhi’s view of the nature of the British rule was rooted in his decision to pitch non-violent battle against British imperialism. It was based on the assumption that the British were not a heartless people and that he would be able to have a dialogue and understanding with them. Ultimately, they would succumb to the pressure of non-violence. But his faith in British sense of justice and honesty was not absolute, it underwent a change in 1904 and by 1905 Gandhi felt bound to confess that the Empire had "scarcely proved itself worthy of the principle of racial equality."

Gandhi's mind thus changed from a loyalist to a rebel. Many factors were responsible for this change. Firstly, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War stirred his emotions of nationalism. He held Japan's national sentiment and unity as an example to be followed. Further Bengal agitation fanned his nationalist aspirations and he supported the agitation with weapons of boycott and Swadeshi. These ideas assumed a different shape in the nationalistic concept and he began to dwell on the selfish motives which led the British to occupy India.

Let us now turn to Besant's perception of British rule and her strategy of achieving self-government, within the empire. In the beginning of her career in India she criticised the British saying "Do not suppose that England can make you either great or free. You alone can make yourselves free." She further fanned the spirit of Nationalism by saying "The British rule in India was unjust, that India was held down and could only be held down by a mass of coercive legislation by deportation of Indians and by their imprisonment without trial."

Not only this, she even remarked that "England's agents use all the methods of autocracy in India, in order to deceive the world into the idea that India is well governed and content."

58. Ibid., vol.4, p.457.
59. Ibid., vol.5, p.44.
60. Ibid., vol.8, p.248.
62. Annie Besant File no.18 B II, p.5-7. (NMML)

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Strangely enough her vehement criticism of the British imperialistic policies and economic exploitation was modulated after 1917. There could be many reasons responsible for this change - a rebel turns loyalist. Firstly, the internment of Besant shook her, secondly she perceived her downfall in the wake of Gandhi emerging as a popular leader and thirdly, her wavering attitude towards the Montagu Chelmsford reforms reflected her changed attitude towards the British. The latter half of 1917 saw a reticent Besant. This is evident from her speech at Bombay in 1921 when she refuted Gandhi and his followers for boycotting the visit of Prince of Wales, and saying that it was like insulting the Monarch.

Her changed attitude can further be reflected in her views on Christianity. In the early years of her career in India as well as in England she refuted Christianity. After becoming the Congress leader she invoked the image of Christ, which seemed to the multitudes gathered there to be a representative of an alien authority. "India the crucified among Nations now stands on this her Resurrection morning, the initiated, the Glorious, the Ever Young, and India shall be seen, proud and self-reliant, strong and free, the radiant splendour of Asia, as the Light and

Blessing of the World" The Congress leaders hearing the speech also felt that her meeting was a failure.

64. Adyar Archives, B.291.
Moreover, her biggest mistake was that she never addressed the Muslims section of the people, nor linked Islam to Theosophy. After her release from internment she made an effort in this direction by raising her voice for freeing the Muslim leaders, Mohammed and Shaukat Ali. She even went to Punjab (which was in danger of German attack on India via N.W.F. and Afghanistan) and assured the people that if the terms of Montagu Chelmsford Report, which was due in July, was not to her liking she would use her H.R.I. to organise hunger strikes against it. But, of course the Montagu Chelmsford Report was a mere eye wash and Gandhi launched the Non Co-op, movement against the British. Besant’s first reaction was to denounce the Report as unworthy of those who had produced it. It was a slow eighteenth - century coach lumbering along a road that led eventually to perpetual slavery. India would be a conglomerate of separate and powerless states under a foreign autocracy, New India declared. The Moderates, who wanted to make the proposals work, withdrew from the Congress while the Extremists wanted nothing but complete independence. Sensing, that she was in danger of losing whatever influence she had, she softened her attitude towards the reforms in the hope of holding on to the Moderates.

Many of her Indian colleagues were out of patience with her, as Tilak explained:

Though I admire her eloquence, learning and unfailing energy for work, I cannot bear ... the supremacy she claims

65. The Times, 15 August 1918.
for her opinions in matters political under the guise that she is inspired by the Great Souls [The Mahatmas] and that such orders... must be unquestionably obeyed. Autocracy may be, and sometimes is, tolerated in theological and Theosophical Society matters, but in democratic politics we must go by the decisions of the majority.... Congress recognizes no Mahatma to rule over it except the Mahatma of Majority.

Thus in the words of Montagu "... she is going downhill so fast that she will disappear ... her influence goes day by day."

It's strange that Besant who started with the opposition of the British mellowed down in their favour in the last lap of her political life while Gandhi started with his hope and aspiration in the British and eventually ousted them out of India.

Political Ideology and Strategy

Mrs. Besant gave a practical idealism and agitational fervour to Indian politics, and no one else. Referring to her fervent nationalism and commenting upon her role in Indian politics, Gandhi remarked in his *Autobiography* "Home Rule has become a household word all over India". He felt that it was only by her initiation that the movement was set afoot in every nook and corner of India. He said "Mrs.Besant had inculcated the mantra (religious recitation) of Home Rule into the minds of Indias". Her perception of the British rule made her a mixture of an Extremist and a Moderate. Gandhi's perception of the

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British rule made him change his attitude towards them after 1919. He evolved a new strategy Satyagraha to combat the Britishers. 'Satyagraha' defines Gandhi "is not physical force. It is pure soul force. Truth is the very substance of the soul." It employed boycotts and strikes as weapons. It called for colossal self-control. He found it most difficult to educate ignorant peasants in Satyagraha.

While Besant on the other hand evolved a different strategy to fight against the British. She put forth her call for Home Rule for India. In her politics she was strictly constitutional in methods. She did not object to a leader disobeying a bad law and bearing its consequences in his own person. When Gandhi, determined to carry on a campaign of passive resistance, by breaking other laws, she opposed him. To break other laws, which one has hitherto to obey, because a new tyrannous law had in it no clause that one could righteously disregard was not her way of political agitation. Such a policy was certain to give rise among the ignorant and the criminal, to general lawlessness, destructive of all Government and fatal to society. It was for this reason that she opposed Non-cooperation. After 23 years of freedom, India still represents a dismal picture—threats are held out for wrecking the constitution from within; people's demands, Kashmir issue; militancy— the technique today for all is hunger strike or mass demonstration or destruction of property. Her

warnings uttered 50 years ago seem to be more valid today.

The process of parting ways between Gandhi and Besant was on the issue of extending or with holding the support by Indians to the British war efforts during the First World War. Their difference lay chiefly on a few marked points. Firstly, Mrs. Besant was not in favour of supporting the British during war, while Gandhi felt at that time that the Indians should support British in order to win in respect. He felt “the surest method of governing an honourable victory is to fight for the British Victory.”

Moreover, Gandhi felt that the time for constitutional reforms would come when the war was over. Mrs Besant was greatly amused at his conviction that India was bound to get self-government, after the war. She argued that:

Only a Britain, hard pressed by the exigencies of a World War, could be made to give freedom to India as England’s difficulty is India’s opportunity.73

She further “warned the Indian 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 generations”.74

But Gandhi was not convinced by her assessment of the British character and the possibility of their conceding freedom to India under duress. Viewing this situation from a totally

73. Kesari, 5 October 1913.
74. New India, 10 September 1915, p.8a-b.
different perspective, he maintained:

... the British government feeling grateful for India's help during the war would without difficulty introduce the necessary reforms and give power to Indians. 75

But after 1919 his views changed and he prepared every Indian for fighting against imperialism in its various forms by building up his inner strength and moral courage. When Gandhi was still supporting favour for British, his contemporaries did not react positively to his call. Motilal Nehru, Bhagwan Das, M.A. Jinnah, Rameswami Iyer, Sarojini Naidu, Lajpat Rai, Subramania Iyer, Srinivasa Sastri and others were all behind Mrs. Besant. Secondly, both differed on the ground that Gandhi's appeal was to the masses, whereas Mrs. Besant's was confined to the elite.

Let us now discuss the extent of success of Gandhi and Mrs. Besant in mobilising the masses. Gandhi was a man of the masses. Being an Indian, it was easy for him to understand the rural environment and the people. Inspite of sympathy for the under privileged, Mrs. Besant could never acquire a hold among the masses. Realizing that national freedom struggle could not be successful unless it had the support of the rural masses, Gandhi concentrated his attention upon this area. Self-reliance in economy or Swadeshi, which had a strategic significance for the liberation of India from the foreign rule, could be achieved through the exploitation of natural resources in rural areas. That was why Gandhi identified himself with people in different ways at the village level by touching their lives. He translated the cultural values into action by providing occupation

75. Kanji Dwarkadas, India's Fight for Freedom (Bombay, 1966), p. 34.
77. Ibid., p. 149.
to villagers such as plying a Charkha and weaving of Khadi. Khadi became a common bond for uniting women from different walks of life. He found spinning a good activity to "induce them to take up the task of serving India". He felt Khadi "will revive Indian villages".

Gandhi felt that spinning and weaving were for women "the first lesson in the school of industry". Khadi was designed to bring in every home a spirit of nationalism and freedom. In this way, abstract political ideas, such as struggle against colonial rule, assumed concrete form for ordinary people. Wearing Khadi meant:

...opposition to colonial rule, identification with the poor and the exploited and an assertion of the spirit of self-reliance, of freedom.

While Gandhi's popularity rose, N.Sri Ram, a former President of International Society explained in London in 1954, that the decline of people's gratefulness to Mrs.Besant was due to her conflict with Gandhi and to the fact that Indians preferred to get their independence through one of themselves rather than through a white person. Her popularity further declined when "after her Presidency of Congress Montagu published his proposals for Indian reform. She declared them outrageously

79. Ibid., vol.26, p.61.
80. Ibid., vol.14, p.87.
inadequate.... Later she suggested that with modifications they might be acceptable and this was not forgiven”. Evidently it was through the channel of common language of the people that he became a man of the masses. A cry of this kind was the need of the hour for Indians were propagating and fighting against the British and the support of an English language at that time was undesirable. While on the other hand, unfortunately Mrs.Besant had no roots in India. Being an Irish lady she groped for support in the “seething, boiling political flood” which according to Montagu was raging across India,” in the Brahmins and the sophisticated elite. This was the real underlying motive why she supported the use of learning Sanskrit (a language of Brahmins in ancient times). Though openly she stressed that Sanskrit and English would serve as common language's between Hindus of North and South, of East and West. But actually, she was only anchoring her foothold in the South with the Brahmins as Sanskrit was not the language of the masses but of the learned.

Both Annie and Gandhi had differences on their political thinking, concepts and application to the political struggle. Gandhi’s strategy was to mount attack on British imperialism from various angles. While Annie boycotted his Non-co-operation

84. Annie Besant, For India's Uplift (Madras, 1910), p.291.
movement on the basis that it was revolutionary and stirred hatred. It would lead to violence. While Gandhi defended himself by indicating his preference for choosing violence rather than cowardice for he averred that cowardice is impotence.

Mrs. Besant's methodology was based on the ideology of non-violence, non-cooperation, but sternly active and never passive. All her agitations were non-violent. She treated her opponents as friends, and would inform the authorities about her future course of action or agitation. She devoted herself to selfless service and suffering. Her method of civil disobedience was in line with true Satyagraha movement, but she never reconciled to it fully because of the violence it inevitably brought with it. Gandhi who came twenty two years after her to theorise about it, left a deeper impact than, Mrs.Besant's Satyagraha. For him it infact, was the active, non-violent resistance of one's soul.

In England Mrs.Besant and her associate Charles Bradlaugh fought social and political battles till 1891, applying the same principles. They saw that persuasive means and not the coercive methods were best suited to the cause. She went into the village, of speaking to the people at large and making them realise what they could do and what was their duty to do. She, thus taught methods she had learned from Bradlaugh. Thus both Bradlaugh and Besant remained Satyagrahis without the word

Satyagraha being in circulation at that time. Gandhi went further ahead of her. He was perhaps first to realise that social development could not gain real momentum unless the elite gave up its false values and its sense of alienation from the wretched and the poor. He fully realised the need of a leader to identify himself with the villagers by living in it and merging in the village life. He fully realised that "salvation can come only through farmers."

Mrs. Besant was as inconsistent about passive resistance as she was with regard to Montagu Chelmsford reforms. She followed Bradlaugh's policy that defiance of the Government was in order as long as she directed it, otherwise it was dangerous. So, when Gandhi initiated the first Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Bills in February 1919 she opposed and criticised it. Surprisingly, her Theosophist Lieutenant Jamnadas Dwarkadas, along with his brother Kanji, who had directed H.R.L. in Bombay during her internship deserted her and joined Gandhi. She tried to prevent them from joining but of no use. Even the branches of her League were used to organise nation-wide Satyagraha. She argued saying "Gandhi might be a Mahatama, a great Saint, but he was no politician; power was not safe with him. Satyagrahist might be saint but their example could betray the ordinary man into disregard of the law..." She was proved right when Gandhi called a hartal in Delhi against the Rowlatt measures.

87. New India, 20 March 1919.
88. Ibid., 21 March 1919.
When his followers tried to force the shopkeepers to join in, a riot began and soldiers fired on the crowd, killing many. Seeing this, Besant in order to emphasise that Gandhi’s methods were wrong, hastily responded that “a Government’s first duty is to stop violence before a riot becomes unmanageable brickbats must inevitably be answered by bullets in every civilised country”. Later, though she tried to amend the damage but she was never forgiven and “bullets for brickbats” became an effective slogan against her. It was Gandhi, who was approached by Bombay politicians headed by B.G.Horniman, Shanker Lal Banker, Jamnadas Dwarkadas, Sarojini Naidu “all of them had been active in the H.R. Movement and knew that Gandhi had suggested ‘passive resistance’ when they had approached him for help in 1917 in securing the release of Besant.” They urged Gandhi to launch a satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act. Observers debated on Gandhi’s success as he had no political party behind him. Mrs.Besant in New India wrote “... which means bloodshed at home and invasion from abroad.”

It is worth while to note that the pre-existing network of H.R.L. which had rejected Besant as its President in 1919 provided for Gandhi, an important organisational base for conveying information of action against Rowlatt Act. It provided in the

89. Ibid., 31 March 1919.
90. Ibid.
91. Interview with Shankarlal Banker, Oral History Transcripts, p.12(NMML).
92. New India, 21 April 1919.
Mrs. Besant and Bishop Leadbeaten at Eerde in 1930.
words of H.F.Owen "important grids" for relaying Gandhi's messages to various parts of the Country, through posters and leaflets. In United Provinces, meetings were held in offices and compounds of the League. In Bengal, the organisation of Mrs.Besant's League had been confined to Calcutta and thus little preparation for satyagraha. In Bihar, the league did not play an important formal role. In South where All India Home Rule League was strong played no effective role. This could be due to Besant's hold in the South. Gandhi suggested that she take the lead in forming a committee in the South to run the campaign but Besant declined and got the Theosophist to repudiate their support for Gandhi's movement.

Another reason for Gandhi's failure of drawing various classes and communities into a movement to protest against the British Government was the emerging force of Non-Brahmin movement that was crystallising against the Brahmin dominated Congress party. Non-co-operation movement faced an early and severe test at the elections to the provincial councils. Mrs.Besant, said Geoffrey Ashe, had a knack for being on the opposite side of Gandhi. In November, the month of the elections Mrs.Besant published a counterblast—a sheaf of articles by herself and colleagues

94. United Provinces Police Reports 1919, paras 446, 511-14 (NAI)
95. Home Political Department March 1919, File no.16, April 1919.
96. Bihar and Orissa Police Reports 1919, paras 399, 546, 596.
entitled "Gandhian Non-Cooperation : Or Shall India Commit Suicide?" Her version was that the policy had been railroaded through unrepresentative Muslim meetings, and then forced on Congress by fanatics who howled her down. His programme meant chaos without victory. In 1922 all important leaders were in jail. Mrs. Besant had nothing spectacular to offer.

Sensing her growing opposition and the HRL being used by Gandhi she resigned from its Presidentship. She went to attend the London session of Select Committee where she tried to monopolise attention as Tilak complained by "evidently intending to show that it was she who alone awakened the sense of political freedom in India". She repeated her belief that India's permanent Government must not reproduce Western forms, but evolve from its ancient institutions. She put forward her proposal for a Bill to establish within the British Empire a Commonwealth of India, which sought to give India the status and powers of a self-governing Dominion. It called for separate tiers of government at the centre, an executive to have all powers excepting defence and foreign relations. The franchise was to be subject to a test of literacy. Had she not observed that the number of literate Indians was few the problem of teaching so arduous, that it would have been decades before a government elected on this basis could have come anywhere near

100. For the draft of the Commonwealth of India Bill refer to Appendix No.1.
being representatives. She continued her work for India and worked on The Commonwealth of India Bill for 3 years. The Bill was published in 1925. It got a mixed response. The Press did not welcome it. Whereas most Moderates and Liberals favoured her view point. In the meanwhile Montagu was replaced by Sir Sydney Oliver, an old friend of Besant from Fabian Society times. She put forth her Bill which was favoured by Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime Minister. Back home, Gandhi reacted negatively to the bill as it recognizes the King Emperor as sovereign. This attitude of Gandhi surprised Besant, because the Congress had always rejected the separation of India from the Empire. However, she continued to mobilise support for the enactment of the Bill.

Even when MacDonald’s Government fell in October 1924, to be replaced by a Conservative administration under Stanley Baldwin, Besant remained convinced that Labour would support the Bill, which the convention directed be placed before Parliament in 1925. The Labour Party sensing that there was no unanimity in India on the Bill refused to accept it.

She failed in her attempt to broaden its support. Gandhi, M.L.Nehru, C.R.Dass all refused to endorse it, while it was said that Jinnah did not even bother to read it. This, together with the qualified franchise, destroyed its chances at the Labour Party Conference.

101. The Times, 10 October 1925.
In December 1925, George Lansbury brought the Revised Bill as a private member's measure, without the backing of the Labour Party. The Bill was accepted by the house and went through one reading. Later, finding no one else to push it, it went back to Parliamentary shelf never to be retrieved. Besant felt that Ramsay MacDonald betrayed her. Yet one cannot deny the efforts made by her, as the journey from Madras to the House of Commons in England was not exactly luxurious.

Not losing hope, she again revealed her interest in Indians in 1927 by opposing the Simon Commission. It is strange that the appearance of the Nehru Report marked an end to her political career. It is a catastrophe that on one hand she issued warnings to the British that failure to give India immediate freedom would provoke a revolution while on the other hand as an ex-President she invited the Congress to set up an alternative government. This may indicate the weakening effect of old age on her clarity of thinking and dynamism. Her imperiousness kept people at a distance. This is clear from Edwin Lutyens' description of her, to his wife, in which he describes about the atmosphere in which Besant stayed with them in Delhi "a sort of Church all day feeling". Moreover, Indians were now, in no mood to listen to mere reason or appreciate good will and intentions for they found a 'native hero' who was more spectacular than Besant. Failing in politics she returned back to Theosophy, till her death on 20 September 1933.

A survey of the newspaper of 1929 indicates that the Indian press conceded that Mrs. Besant had been chiefly responsible for creating a new atmosphere of optimism through her work i.e. Home Rule Movement and her earnest efforts for the legislation of Commonwealth of India Bill. It goes to her credit that since her arrival in India, since her address to the I.N.C. in 1894 (for the first time) she remained an ardent champion of India’s cause. Thus, the case for full freedom for India was made by Mrs. Besant, A.O. Hume, William Wedderburn and other European friends of India, long before the mass-based movements on this issue were launched by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi’s leadership. Only difference after 1920 was that instead of the anglicised leadership, there was a change when Indians took over and people began proclaiming ‘Swaraj is birth right’.

In the early 30’s she withdrew from politics. Mrs. Besant disappeared from the political scene and resumed her work in Theosophical Society. During the last two years of her life she stayed at Adyar. From the middle of 1932 she was confined to her room in Adyar without much strength to move about. Her mouthpiece New India too at the end of 1932 came to an abrupt stop due to the lack of finances. Mrs. Besant passed away in her sleep at four in the afternoon of 20 September, 1933 and The London Times in its obituary the next day wrote:

Not many years ago the death of Mrs. Besant would have been an event of importance in Indian politics, the chief
field of her agitation and propaganda. There her influence had waned but she remained the spiritual leader of numbers of people all over the world. She possessed eloquence of the most exceptional kind, with organizing ability no slight literary talent, was shown in her numerous books and pamphlets.103

Glowing tributes were paid to her by the press all over the world. For three days, the daily newspapers of India were filled largely with tributes to Annie Besant and her unforgettable service to India. The Banaras Hindu University, which owned its existence to Mrs. Besant, suspended its teaching work as a mark of respect. And the University road, which was to be named after Dr. Bhagwan Das, was named on his request as Annie Besant Road. Her statues were unveiled in some cities including Bombay and Madras. Her activities and services, which had covered a very wide field and throughout the civilised world in both the hemispheres were highlighted. In religion she was a Yogini in politics she was an uncrowned empress, in theosophy she was a world messenger, as a social reformer she was a Joan of Arc, Nightingale, Gargi—all in one imbued with emotion, sincerity, humanism and the spirit of a warrior. She was world renowned in those days when there was lack of publicity media and was admired by all those who had known and heard of her activities. One of her earlier biographers and admirers A.H. Nethercot remarked:

If India had followed her advice in 1929 the country would probably have obtained Dominion Status seventeen or so years earlier than it did, it would probably have retained Pakistan and there would have been no Kashmir problem. For

103. London Times, 21 September 1933.
in 1929 Jinnah and the Muslim League had not yet grown strong enough to demand partition or to have thought of it.104

Evaluating Besant’s pioneering and multifaceted contribution, Sarojini Naidu rightly remarked,

If there had been no Dr. Besant there would perhaps have been no Mahatma Gandhi. She had sponsored Swadeshi, if not Khadi proper, for long years. She had pleaded with great force for communal peace and harmony. All this programme was taken up by Gandhi later. Under her inspiring lead there was a terrific upsurge of emotion for the freedom of the country from all bonds, but in a way the path had already been paved for him by Dr. Besant.105.