Introduction
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To write about Dr. Besant is a very difficult task for not only is she a many-sided personality, but also so great in her qualities that to portray them adequately would require a masterhand. Her life time ideals and activities form a vast theme and one does not know where to begin and where to end.

The problem, I have chosen, entails an analytical, critical and evaluative study of the understanding, interpretation and projection of India by Annie Besant since her arrival here in 1893. Her interest and awareness of India originated quite early. But it was during her prolonged stay in India from 1893-1933 that she could understand the problems faced by Indians and embark upon her mission with tremendous zeal.

Despite the fragmentary efforts by her contemporaries, friends, admirers, political rivals and researchers in the form of recollections, articles, biographies and piecemeal assessments of her social, political, religious and educational activities, it is only a small part of the effort. I want to put her multifaceted contribution and work done in India in a proper perspective.

A review of the published works on Annie Besant shows that her outstanding contribution as an ideologue, writer, journalist, crusader for women's rights and India's freedom has not been
fully understood, appreciated and recorded. Of course, a few detailed books have focussed upon her activities in India—social, political and religious. For example writers like Arthur H. Nethercot and Sri Prakasa, who published their work in 1960’s confined their discussions to one particular aspect of her contribution. Nethercot, in his two books gives an account of Annie’s entire life but he has not highlighted her life in India to a great detail. Prakasa too has highlighted one single aspect or phase of her life in her entire life span.

After a gap of a decade two more books were published. Dr. Raj Kumar’s study *Annie Besant — Rise to Power in Indian Politics 1914—1917*(1981) is undoubtedly an interesting account of her political activities in India but it too focusses on a short period of her political carrier. Though he wrote a detailed account of Home Rule Movement but his sources are limited. Ann Taylor’s study *Annie Besant a Biography* (1992) is a detailed analysis of her activities in England. She has made a critical and detailed study of Annie but has obliquely touched upon her political and social activities in India. Put together both these books do not construct a balanced view of Annie Besant’s multi-faceted achievements in India.

Thus my review of available literature shows that there is scope for a full length critical biographical study evaluating the entire process of her transition from theosophy to nationalism. I found it a worthwhile project because many more new sources are available to the researcher. I have endeavoured in my thesis how Annie Besant’s experiences in England had groomed her ideologically for her social and political intervention in Indian affairs.
It has been my endeavour to make an integrated study of Annie Besant's life and times, analyse and evaluate her wide-ranging activities which elucidate her transition from theosophy to nationalism. The first question which nags our mind is why a few unconventional western women namely Annie Besant, Madeline Slade and Sister Nivedita chose to make India their field of activity? Were they, particularly Annie Besant, attracted by the spiritual basis of Indian civilization as opposed to Western materialism?

When Mrs. Besant arrived in India, the Renaissance had reached a fairly advanced stage in this country. What kind of role did she envisage for herself? Was she a social reformer in search for a "golden age"? Did she want to recast the contemporary India in the framework of its past glory and excellence in literature, art and philosophy? Did she advocate the process of renovating Indian culture? Was she interpreting the Indian tradition to befit the urgent concerns of the subjugated Indians under the colonial rule?

Ostensibly, she had worked for socio-religious reform but was she accepting the recrudescence of superstition and endorsing caste system? To this she replied that in "lighting a fire, there is always some smoke... at their peril do political and social leaders ignore this tendency." She meant that while recasting the past, the ambiguities are not totally eliminated.

I have endeavoured to discuss Besant's conception of Indian nationhood in ancient times which was popular in the 19th century and how she instilled national pride in the Indians. Jinnah remarked "No other person has worked and served our cause with that singleness of purpose, devotion and transparent sincerity as has Mrs. Besant". It is interesting to note how she evolved a policy of opposition to imperialism on a world-wide scale and solidarity with anti-colonial movements in other parts of the world with special reference to Ireland. She established the principle that Indians should hate British imperialism but not British people. She was subjected to strong criticism at the hands of Indians, Europeans and Anglo-Indians who blamed her for inciting racial and caste hatred. I have tried to analyse how she created a revolution in the minds of Indians? Did the British government treat her harshly for stoking the fire of patriotism in the Indian youth? Did she achieve any great constructive benefit for mankind? Did her Home Rule League prove beneficial? How far did the stream of Home Rule movement flow "into the swelling river of India's freedom struggle."

Mrs Besant gave to Indians a sharp sense of history and believed that the past may be dramatically reconstituted, bringing into sharp focus the need of a people for a different

2. *New India*, 20 February 1918.
self-image from the one that they held of themselves. The knowledge about the past ultimately ended in the creation of a persuasive rhetoric, shared by Hindu liberals and conservatives alike, especially in relation to the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood as located in the Vedic period.

The use of the term Aryan by European scholars—particularly by Annie Besant, who spoke of their lofty spirituality, ... high morality, ... Aryan social virtues, character, courage, hospitality, charity, reverence and a vow to keep truth unstained. Did Annie Besant construct a Racist Aryan version of the Orientalist Hindu Golden Age? It was this newly formulated concept of a golden age, vastly popularized by the German Indologist F.Max Muller, that became so influential in later Indian thought, which tended to be reactionary in some respects.

Was Annie Besant open to the charge of romanticization of India’s past especially its womanhood? It seemed that she was engaged in the task of reconstructing the image of a super woman, who combined "... the wisdom of Gargi, the tameless courage and wit of Savitri, the unchanging love of Sita, the proud endurance of Damayanti, the unwavering fealty of Shakuntala".

How does her account differ from European writings on Hindu women especially by Mrs. Speier and Clarisse Bader. Mrs. Besant's predecessors had constructed India's past by making available to the people the 'pristine form' of indigenous traditions that were being resurrected. Unlike the Orientalists who were romanticizing India's past, lock stock and barrel, Mrs. Besant reacted mildly sometimes and sometimes strongly to the specific forms of inequality of caste, class and gender prevailing in India. I have tried to analyse the nature of her social reform work with reference to Indian society. This discussion becomes specially relevant in view of the strong negative perceptions of the missionaries, administrators, travellers, Evangelicals and Utilitarians who were engaged in history writing of a particular kind. Historical consciousness and especially the women's question were critical components in this stream of writing too.

Was Annie Besant trying to score a psychological advantage over Indians as the colonised people through her criticism of evil social customs oppressing women? Was her focus on the low status of Indian women, a subtle assertion of the moral

6. Mrs. Speier, Life in Ancient India (1956); reprinted as Phases of Indian Civilization (Delhi, 1973).
superiority of ruling race? Did her writings belong to the bulk of the colonial writing, represented by James Mill, Charles Grant and Alexander Duff who had highlighted the peculiarities of Hindu civilization and the barbaric practices, pertaining to women?

In my thesis, I have tried to answer some of the questions raised in the preceding paragraphs. My thesis runs into eight chapters. In the first chapter, I refer to her childhood, youth, unhappy marriage, divorce and its impact on her future life and mental ethos, and her ideological evolution especially the influences which gave her a sense of direction and fulfillment and a goal in life. In the second chapter, my focus is on the ideals of Theosophical Society, its impact on Besant and its organisational expansion under Mrs. Besant’s leadership. The third chapter discusses her perception of Indian society and polity on the basis of her reading of ancient scriptures and classics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. The fourth chapter focusses on her efforts for organising Central Hindu College and Benares Hindu University. The fifth chapter deals with how Mrs. Besant organised Indian women into a pressure group and her

8. Mill, Grant and Duff drew up what has been termed as a 'National' account sheet of moral lapses and strong point of Indian and Western Civilization. See for example James Mill, The History of British India with notes by H.H.Wilson 5th ed. (London, James Madden, 1840), pp. 312-13. According to him Hindu women were in "... a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex ... nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for women .... They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education and [of a share] in the paternal property.... The remarkable barbarity, the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is prevalent in Hindustan".

crusade for women's uplift and their social and political rights. The sixth chapter highlights her journalistic skills which she had utilized for promoting the cause of India's Home Rule for India and to articulate her views on contemporary social issues. The seventh chapter deals with her active role as a crusader of India's freedom with her cry for Home Rule and the eighth chapter is a comparative study of Mrs Besant and Gandhi - similarities and differences on various issues. In the conclusion I have tried to evaluate her rich contribution and legacy for India - her second homeland.