Chapter I
Making of Annie Besant
CHAPTER - 1
MAKING OF ANNIE BESANT

Very few people in India to-day have any idea of the magnitude or significance of the contribution made by Annie Besant to the all round progress of this country - educational, social and political. Her forty years of unceasing and untiring activities brought about an all round progress of India. Her rich and variegated experiences contributed chiefly to the awakening of a drowsy India. She was undoubtedly a magnificent figure whose past experience helped considerably not only in influencing the men of her times but also hastened the journey for India's freedom. Her penetrating intellect and organisational capacity of high order and courage of conviction, which challenged every threat and obstacle in her path, accounted for her total involvement without hesitation in the awakening of India.

To understand the various dimensions of Annie's struggle for the on going political and cultural renaissance in India and the role of her later senior contemporaries e.g. philosophers and journalists, we should, I feel, examine the implications of conflicting strands in her personality as it evolved from her childhood to youth. What did these early afflictions teach her about what roles she should take up as an adult? The question as to how a quiet girl like Annie Besant, was transformed into a world renowned figure, involves a study of the environment in which she grew, the factors that influenced her mind, shaped her character and unfolded her hereditary potentialities.
Parentage and Formative Influences

Annie Besant was born in London on 1st October, 1847 at 2 Fish Street Hill. She inherited English and Irish blood — her father William Burton Persee Wood being English and her mother Emily purely Irish. In fact she was rather proud of her Irish lineage as illustrated from her observations in her Autobiography: "three quarters of my blood and all my heart was Irish." Despite the fact that London was her birthplace and scene of her later activities, she never developed any attachment for it. During her early childhood the Woods had a big name, for example, her great uncle Matthew Wood was a famous Sheriff and Lord Mayor of London. He was elected as Mayor of London and received a baronetcy for services to the royal family from the Duke of Kent's daughter. His sons were associated with careers in the Church, the law, the city and in Parliament and were prospering when Annie was born.

However, her father William Wood was less fortunate lacking both power and wealth. He grew up in the years of scarcity when Ireland suffered a series of poor harvests resulting in a famine threat. While studying medicine at Trinity College Dublin he met Emily (Annie's mother) and got married.

*For detailed information about Annie Besant's family background see chart on the facing page 3.

The Wood Family

William Wood of Tiverton
(1738 -- 1809)

Catherine Cluse
(d. 1798)

and others

Sir Matthew Wood = Maria Page
(1768 - 1843) (d. 1848)

Rev. Sir John Page Wood
(1796 -- 1866)

Baron Hatherley
(1801 -- 1881)

Western Wood

Sir Henry Truemen Wood = Annie Wood
(1845 -- 1920) (1847 -- 1933)

Rev. Frank Besant
(1840 -- 1917) (d. 1852)

Infant

Mabel Emily Besant = Prof. Ernest Scott.
(1870) (1869) (1870)

Arthur Digby Besant = Kathleen E. J. Pineo
(1869)

Mabel Emily Besant = Prof. Ernest Scott.
(1870)

Soon after the marriage the Wood family was caught up in the tragic exodus following the devastating famine of 1845. Forced to abandon his medical education, William (Annie's father) took his wife to England where a relative offered him a position of an underwriter in the City. As a result he lived comfortably in St. John's Wood. Emily's parents and sisters whose fortunes had already declined too lived in the less fashionable part of London.

William's job as an underwriter gave him less time to pursue his keen interest in medicine. Once while helping a medical friend in dissecting a dead body the cut on his finger got infected ending to his death from "galloping consumption". Emily was so upset that on the funeral day she stayed at home with Annie. Her hyper sensitive mind followed the funeral service stagewise in her mind and fainted. Afterwards she said she attended the funeral service and walked behind the coffin to the grave. This was proved when Emily found the unmarked grave. She had in her a "vivid strain of Celtic superstition" which, she displayed a few months after her husband's death when she had predicted the death of her sick son named Alf who died shortly. These instances of her mother's psychic powers left a deep impression on Annie's mind who was inclined to believe in ghosts. Regarding her fascination for the supernatural phenomenon Annie later recorded in her Autobiography that how in her childhood she

3. Ibid., p. 8.
4. Ibid., p. 11.
Annie Wood and her mother.

Annie Wood at 15.
found "elves and fairies of all sorts as real things." As a result she developed in her a habit of day-dreaming which made her hyper imaginative and mystical.

Emily's unbearable sorrow turned into dismay on realising that her husband had left no money to provide for the family. Forced by circumstances, the poverty-stricken Wood family moved to Richmond Terrace, Clapham which was close to Annie's grandfather's house. As a child the only adult male close to her was her grandfather, with whom she spent her time listening to Irish songs and tales which strengthened the Irish trait in her mind.

Her father was deeply read in philosophy and had "outgrown the orthodox belief" of Catholic religion. In her later life, she too reflected the same unconventional attitude towards religion when she mocked at the tenets of the Christian faith.

Having lost her father at an early age of five it was her mother who left an indelible mark on her mental development. Annie always regarded her mother as her model and heroine and observed that her "love for her was an idolatry while hers for me a devotion." She was highly impressed by her mother's self-pride which was revealed by one of the incidents related in her Autobiography. In order to preserve her self-respect her mother spurned the offers of financial help from her husband's relatives by saying "A gentle woman might starve, but she must not run in

5. Annie Besant, n.1., p.16.
6. Ibid., p.11.
7. Ibid., p.22.
debt; she might break her heart, but it must be with a smile on her face." Her mother, despite their poverty possessed a "resolute mind and will." Her strong determination and resourcefulness helped her to fulfill her husband's wish of educating their son Henry at Harrow. Evidently she had inherited mental strength and courage of conviction from her mother which she was to display later in her life by publishing "The Knowlton Pamphlet."

Her capacity for intensive but fast reading was inherited from her father for, at the early age of eight she devoured books, her favourite being Milton's *Paradise Lost* and enjoyed being lost in the world of fantasy.

Another major formative influence on Annie Wood was Miss Ellen Marryat, a wealthy but kind lame spinster. At the age of eight Annie became her pupil. Ellen was the sister of Captain Fredric Marryat, the author of popular novels and children's books including *Peter Simple*, *Mr. Midshipman Easy* and *Masterman Ready*. After his early death Ellen bought the residential property Fern Hill, near Charmouth in Dorset where Annie and Ellen's niece Amy stayed with her. Ellen's social background paid an important part in moulding Annie's personality as a child. In her *Autobiography* Annie Besant recalled her impressions about Ellen Marryat as a teacher. She taught them languages --

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English, French, German — and trained them “in the soundest, most thorough fashion.”

Having a genius for teaching, Miss Ellen, used the method of observation and experience rather than learning by rote without understanding. These things had their impact on Annie in “determining the kind of woman Annie was to become.” Except religious poetry, plays and romantic novels were forbidden in Ellen’s little kingdom and she remained indifferent to people.

Ellen, allocated a major role to the study of religion. Being an Evangelical, she narrated stories of missionaries like Robert Moffat and David Livingstone and made them learn passages from the Bible by heart. Annie confessed that she learnt the biblical passages to distinguish her good memory and not for its message. She undoubtedly was intelligent but shows her honesty by revealing that she liked parts of Old and New Testament as it pleased her ears and she got dreamy pleasure in repeating them aloud.

Though Ellen Marryat educated Annie methodically yet her education was incomplete as she grew up in ignorance of how ordinary people lived. This was probably a major cause of her failure in India as she could not reach out to the common people since she had not learnt to communicate effectively with the common people. With no experience of ordinary people — her judgement as to the fawning and dishonest was destined to let her down.

11. Annie Besant, n.2., p.16.
In order to familiarize them with European culture, she took them on a tour around Europe. In Paris, Annie had her first encounter with Roman Catholicism which appealed to her much more than Evangelicalism for she "discovered the sensuous enjoyment that lay in introducing colour and fragrance and pomp into religious services so that the gratification of the aesthetic emotions became dignified with the garb of piety." Despite Ellen's austere upbringing of her pupils, Annie's romantic mind was stirred by images, symbols and rituals which assumed an important place in her life for they gave stimuli to her spiritual imagination. She was first attracted to Cathocolism, and then the warmth and brilliance of High Anglicanism swayed her and later in India Hinduism and Brahmins appealed to her, for it was endowed with colour, rituals and traditions. This could probably be the reason why she chose Benaras and Madras as the centres of her varied theosophical activities as both were religious places, full of temples and dominated by Brahmins.

Annie's eight years of schooling under Ellen had many positive implications for Annie's intellectual growth. She learnt to work independently for if she complained Ellen told them that they must not expect auntie as a "crutch all her life" Annie also owed her 'love of knowledge' which remained with her till the end of her life turning her into an ardent lover of books and a prolific writer.

15. Ibid., p.16.
At the end of her school tenure Annie returned home. At home, Emily had a horror of precocity and in her over protective attitude she harmed Annie by keeping her ignorant of marriage and its biological needs. She loved to see her girl bright and gay and thus the lively yet artificial atmosphere built by her mother accentuated Annie's romantic bent of mind. One thing Annie detested most was cross-examination. Being temperamental and sentimental she liked to live in a world of fantasies and thus hated criticism. She liked people to praise her. The highest praise she could bestow on a friend was "You never cross-examined me."

The Easter of 1866 was a memorable day for her as she was introduced to a clergyman Frank Besant in the little mission church of Clapham where she had gone for a holiday. Perhaps her enthusiasm for religion attracted her towards him. Religious observance governed Frank's life from childhood along with an atmosphere of high morality and strict Evangelicalism. Thus he took the vocation of a clergyman.

Marriage and Separation

After a brief spell of courtship Frank aged twenty-five years then proposed to Annie when they were left unchaperoned. Being shy and conventional at that point of time Annie did not decline his offer. Her silence was taken as a positive reply by Frank. In between the engagement she tried to break the

engagement but the fear of hurting her mother and shattering her pride compelled her to get married and after fourteen months they got married in the winter of 1867.

The impulse which had propelled her into marriage spent its force and everything connected with it turned from white to black. The small task of the other ladies who talked only of "babies and servants," made her aloof, dull and depressed. She was often brusque with her peers and rivals. While Frank was teaching she remained idle, moreover Cheltanham was an idle town where she could do no service to the unfortunate. Her childish fretting for her mother, her tactlessness seemed to her the best roles to be adopted. This is evident from an extract from her Autobiography:

I, accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive, very hot tempered, had never had a harsh word spoken to me, never been ordered to do anything.  

Her idolatress hero worship of her mother was a bad influence. Being an unconventional sort of girl she could not accept the values of patriarchial system.

However, she did not indulge in self-pity but became proud and defiant and channelised her energies in writing short stories which were published in the Family Herald. Having earned her first sum of money gave her tremendous delight, and a sense of independence, which was soon shattered by her husband who appropriated the cheque. According to Married Women's Property Act of 1882 a married woman's earnings belonged to her husband by

17. Annie Besant, n.2., p.45.
18. Annie Besant, n.1., p.64.
law. Despite this injustice she utilized her energy and facility in writing which was checked in 1868 due to her pregnancy. Her husband's attitude and her illness drove her into acute depression. She gave birth to a boy named Arthur Digby. Her love for the Irish cause made her name her son 'Digby' after the name of the barrister who defended the Manchester martyrs.

Barely after a year she gave birth to a girl named Mabel Emily Besant who was a premature baby because of shock. As relations between the two were not cordial for she wanted to limit her family and he rebuked her by striking her and asking her to leave him. During those days of strife Annie made an attempt to commit suicide but her conscience tormented and rebuked her as if saying "O, coward, who used to dream of martyrdom, and cannot bear a few short years of pain." Annie tried for judicial separation on grounds of cruelty describing her existence with him as "degraded by an intolerable sense of bondage." Such things were not conventional during those days.

Back home with her mother they experienced hard days as Emily was cheated of all her money by a solicitor. Henry (Annie's brother) had a poor practice as a lawyer and Mabel developed epileptic fits. At this turn of time she became a changed person from a timid woman into a brave one. Her religious

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19. Ann Taylor, op.cit., p.34.
21. Ibid., p.81.
past became her enemy and her intense faith in Christ was shattered. During these weary months of torment and anxiety Annie found relief in doing some parish work in Sibsey where she learnt about agricultural labourer’s plight and thus began her political education while the religious strife went on within her.

Despite these diversions she could not ignore her married life for a longer time. Her preoccupation with theology annoyed Frank and his impatience and imitation due to her constant opposition led him to bodily hurt her. After experiencing this humiliation she left his house and moved to London as an escape.

Failure of her married life gave a new direction to her life and she turned to religion for solace. At this juncture she was attracted and comforted by the founder of Theistic Church Rev. Charles Voysey’s preachings whose message came as a ‘gleam of light’ for her. Their friendship was not liked by Frank who did not like Voysey’s attitude towards faith. Annie had the tendency of hero worshipping. At this juncture Voysey was her hero and she copied him, spending most of her time at their house in Dulwich. Here she was introduced to Thomas Scott who busied himself in publishing series of pamphlets extolling unorthodox views from rationalism and spiritualism to republicanism. She wrote her first essay ‘On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth’ under anonymous. When she came back to Sibsey a queer whim of preaching overcame her and on the pretext of practising the organ she delivered a lecture to the rows of empty pews.

I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression.23

In 1873 her marriage was broken. Her essay published with the inscription—'By the wife of a beneficed clergy-man' added fuel to fire and was crucial for Frank's carrier as he being a staunch Evangelican clergyman. In his Parochial Diary he mentions that he never consented to the printing or the publishing of the said pamphlet... contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion.

Annie blamed Frank's brother Walter Besant for the ultimate break up of her marriage. While Walter felt he must warn his brother of the social and professional dangers of having his name associated with her. Moreover, he being a writer did not want any sort of scandal to be attached to their name Besant. Unlike what the Besant's thought Annie became more rebellious and wrote another pamphlet for Thomas Scott. This step of hers renewed her correspondence with the Voyseys. These were bitter days which she faced. A relative of Frank Besant urged Frank to send an ultimatum asking her either to return and take her place at all the services of the Church or go to her mother. She of course choose the latter. Existence for a young woman around twenty five years of age was no joke. The conservative Victorian society and venomous tongues made her life difficult. But she

writes in her Autobiography "I would rather go through it all again than live in society under the burden of an acted lie." Survival was difficult and she did regret giving up all the comforts and assured position in the Victorian society. Worst of all she felt sick with nervous exhaustion.

Her brother Henry, helped her by applying for divorce (which in those days was restricted) on the ground of cruelty. Since married women had no legal standing, as law regarded husband and wife as one individual, Henry and a solicitor had to act as trustees on her behalf. Annie luckily got the custody of her daughter Mabel, while Digby was to remain under the charge of his father. A quarter of his income £110 a year went to Annie for the maintenance of their daughter. She could only take her gifts and personal possessions. Her brother offered her a home with him but told her to cut off her relations with Voysey and Thomas Scott. To this, she did not agree, and left them along with her mother and had very little to do with them.

However, her troubles as a married woman did not come to an end. Her increasing involvement and passionate advocacy of social causes especially the issue of limiting a family had accentuated the tension between the Besants. The republication of Knowlton Pamphlet (discussed in detail in Section-II of this Chapter) and her consequent trial led to the loss of the legal custody of her daughter Mabel on the ground of her unfitness to rear a young girl.

Intellectual Influences.

Being on her own exposed her to a lot of hardship and poverty, revealing to her the tyranny of social norms and the unkindness of people because of being a single woman and a rebel against orthodox Christianity. During these hard times when all turned against her, Moncure Daniel Conway offered her help and hospitality. She worked as a governess for Mr. Woodward, a vicar and shifted to a small house in Colby Road, Gipsy Hill, Upper Norwood.

Too much of religiosity brought troubles untold for Annie. Death of her mother apart from being an emotional blow to her removed a dependable source of economic support. She remained hungry and was obliged to look for employment as a writer. Thomas Scott offered to employ her for collecting material for his pamphlets. She browsed through books in British Museums and Libraries. They paid her for the work. Now she was no longer afraid of social constraints or husband’s leash and she boldly signed her own name on the pamphlets which contained theist matter. In meetings she would air her feelings about theism openly and demonstrated her potential as a speaker. But this field of religious preaching was male dominated and women were hardly given any public roles. Mrs. Harriet Law, was the only

woman in England as a preacher at that time. Inspite of his reservations about suitability of women as religious preachers, Scott asked George Holyoake to listen to her. Impressed by her eloquence he recommended her work.

Another turning point in her life occurred after a chance reading of Charles Bradlaugh's atheistic journal *National Reformer* while waiting at a railway station. Having read it a revolution broke loose within her. She enrolled her name as an active member in the Free Thought Society and on 2nd August 1874 she set "foot in a Freethought Hall" which was packed like sardines. The dynamic personality and the eloquent oratory of Bradlaugh swept her off her feet as is evident from her observations. His "eloquence, fire, sarcasm, pathos, passion, all in turn were bent against Christian superstition." Afterwards her contact with Bradlaugh turned into a long term association for the varied causes espoused by the Free Thought Society and its journal. The latter provided her a forum to express and publish her writings advocating new ideas in his paper *The National Reformer*. She also delivered lectures wherein she displayed exceptional talent, confident air of a gentlewoman which posed a threat for Mrs. Harriet Law.

Annie’s vast general knowledge and reading habit proved to be an asset for her as she graduated from a columnist to a political reporter. The publication of Knowlton Pamphlet and the publishing of Law of Population added fuel to fire to her already

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29. Ibid., p. 116.
staggering married life. Having lost the custody of her daughter made her frantic and ready to be slaughtered like a lamb by living with Frank. But he abolished a temporary injunction restraining his wife from molesting or annoying him. Thus the court gave them judicial separation—an uncommon feature of Victorian society. Still, she did not allow the vagaries of life to cow down her efforts for social cause. She maintained her social balance by channelising her energies into writing rather than wallowing in self pity.

II

Work for Public Causes.

Bradlaugh and Annie decided to issue a new version of 'The Fruits of Philosophy' under Freethought Publishing Company. Publication of the book 'The Fruits of Philosophy' (perhaps in 1835), a treatise on birth control was written by an American Dr. Charles Knowlton. A disreputable Bristol bookseller published it by adding some improper pictures. He was prosecuted and convicted for this and the book was withdrawn from circulation. Annie felt that it was a medical work and its knowledge would help the working class from poverty by having too many children. In her preface to the republished edition she wrote that this pamphlet would answer "all questions affecting the happiness of the people, whether they be theological, political, or social, fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards."

In the preface of this pamphlet Annie’s maturity as an intellectual is reflected in her fight for public causes. Over population was one of the most important social question of the day and she wanted to fight for the individual’s right to public discussion on the issue of voluntary family limitation. The major purpose for writing this pamphlet was her belief that, over population led to poverty. The republication of the pamphlet was not an abration but an expression of her intellectual conviction. Since her social conscience compelled her to write this pamphlet she was not afraid of the consequences. Charles and Annie was not blind to the dangers of the defiance of the official restrictions on the circulation of the pamphlet. “To me it meant the loss of the pure reputation I prized, the good name I had guarded—scandal the most terrible a woman could face”. She further states “I have seen the misery of the poor”. However she decided not to give priority to her own safety or good reputation but to fight for the welfare of the poor whose miseries were the outcome of a big family.

As soon as the pamphlet was put on sale warrants were issued against them and they were arrested on 6th April and discharged on bail. After their trial at the Central Criminal Court they were sentenced to six months imprisonment. Soon after they moved for a writ of errors leading to their release. Interestingly this pamphlet made brisk business and was surprisingly bought by clergymen’s wives. The steep decline in the birth rate that occurred after 1877 was perhaps a result of the mobilization of the public opinion in favour of voluntary

31. Ibid., p.183.
family limitation in the wake of Bradlaugh Besant trial on this issue.

The publication of the 'Knowlton Pamphlet' reflects her involvement with social causes and defines her priorities. Asserting her power as a champion for the cause of family limitation. Her next pamphlet entitled 'The Law of Population' was published in installments in the National Reformer from 7 October, 1877. It advocated scientific checks to population, "early marriages so that prostitution might be destroyed; limitation of family that pauperism might be avoided."

Interestingly she has denounced celibacy in her pamphlet 'Law of Population'. She advocated early marriage best for physical and moral health as "it guards purity, soften the affection, trains the heart and preserves physical health. It teaches thoughts for others, gentleness and self control". This statement seems to be a contradiction of her personal experience of being married at a very young age. Had she forgotten her own bitter experiences of marriage so soon? Or did she alter her views on marriage after having gone through the ordeal of fire i.e. separation? I presume that perhaps the domestic harmony shared by Bradlaugh and her compelled her to say this. Hypatia, Bradlaugh's daughter in her published memoirs of her father recalled how "Annie took possession of their father and used him..." and it never occurred to Annie to consider the feelings of others and that is why Hypatia writes that she was "the most tactless person." It is clear that there was clash in her

32. Ibid., p.188.
34. Bradlaugh Bonner Family Papers, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner's memorandum; also in Ann Taylor, op.cit., p.124.
public views on marriage and family life and her actual handling of her marital problems which led to her legal fight for separation. This lack of coordination can be attributed to her confused thinking and intellectual immaturity.

Reflecting on her unsavoury experiences in her public life during the past few years she made up her mind not to join any society which regarded free thinkers with dislike. Her personal life was also not too happy as she had lost the custody of her daughter Mabel. In order to elevate her suffering and channelise her energies in a constructive direction she turned her attention to the study of law and the condition of industrial workers and land reforms for peasants. Here also she set up a precedent as she was the first female to be admitted to the English Bar until 1921 but the University closed upon her when she became a Socialist as they feared that she might "start a propaganda among the students and drive them away with her obnoxious opinion."

As a student of law she came in close contact with her teacher Edward Bibbins Aveling whom she considered an "ideal teacher". "Under Aveling's influence Annie was led to Socialism which led them to intellectual collaboration. In her Autobiography she mentions "Socialism in its splendid ideal appealed to my heart, while the economic soundness of its basis convinced my head." Henceforth her articles were coloured by socialistic ideology.

35. National Reformer, 19 September 1880.
38. Ibid., p.275.
As her involvement in Socialistic causes increased she drifted apart from the Free thinkers group. Ideological differences between Annie and Bradlaugh began to surface from 1884 onwards. This was evident from her articles in the magazine Our Corner whose sole proprietor and editor she was. He was as dismissive of the socialist dreams of the past as of its contemporary apologists. Annie being steadfast would never bow before unjust laws and this made her drift away from Bradlaugh. Moreover a debate in St. James Hall, London between Bradlaugh and Mr. Hyndman a socialist on 17th April 1884 aroused her socialist feelings and she wrote:

the cry of starving children was ever in my ears, the sobs of women poisoned in lead works, exhausted in rail works, driven to prostitution by starvation, made old and haggard by ceaseless work ... trade combinations could only mean increased warfare—necessary indeed for the time as weapons of defence— but meaning war, not brotherly cooperation of all for the good of all. 39

Thus Our Corner served as a valuable aid in socialistic propaganda. Bitter attacks were made on her for her Socialistic advocacy by some Radicals in the Freethought Society. In her Autobiography she conceded that her critiques called her mind a "mind of a milk jug" implying her frequent changes in her intellectual convictions and opinions. She turned a deaf year to

39. Ibid., pp. 276-7.
40. Ibid., p. 285.
this. In her self defence she observed:

A woman who thought her way of Christianity and Whiggism into Freethought and Radicalism absolutely alone, who gave up every old friend, male and female, rather than resign the beliefs she had struggled to in solitude; who, again, in embracing active Socialism, has run counter to the views of her nearest 'male friends', such a woman may very likely go wrong, but I think she may venture, without conceit, to at least claim independence of judgement.

Not bothering to waste her time on self-defence she plunged into deep work for the year 1886 was a terrible one for labourers as wages were reduced and unemployment was at its peak. She was deeply moved to see their plight as passion of pity grew stronger. She gave up her comfort, and time for working for them.

Thus after writing many fiery articles on the burning questions of the day a Socialist Party was formed and Annie was its Home Secretary with G.B. Shaw as its President. Then in the same year she resigned from her co-editorship of the National Reformer, for she strongly felt "... as Socialism becomes more and more a question of practical politics, differences of theory tend to produce differences in conduct." Thus she ended her thirteen years association with National Reformer.

Henceforth, she devoted herself whole-heartedly in labour issues. One such issue was unemployment. Four socialists after returning from a meeting passed through Trafalgar Square and were moved to indignation by the misery of the unemployed. They raised a banner of revolt which read "we will have work or bread." Annie took up their issues. This act won her admiration. Eager to curb the spread of workers unrest the

43. *Commonweal*, 'The Truth about the Unemployed', 26 November 1887.
Government passed a law banning meetings at public places. She challenged the Metropolitan Board of Works by law prohibiting workers gathering and meetings in the public places.

She raised her voice against the working condition of women and children and their low wages. The management hinted that if workers went on "strike they would stop production until new hands could be found to agree to their terms". Annie could not take this any more and she suggested that the workers ought to boycott the factories. Sensing workers fear and reluctance to talk to news-reporters and journalists, Annie gave them assurance that they would make themselves personally responsible for paying the wages of any girl dismissed as a result of talking to them.

Encouraged by her success she took up various issues concerning factory workers - defending people from unjust landlords, exposing workhouse scandals, cruelty to children and women, extortion and insanitary working conditions in the factories. Both Stead and Annie had projected these problems into public mind through their weekly paper Link. For example, in her article 'White Slavery in London' she wrote about the unhealthy working conditions and poor salaries of the factory workers. Especially, Annie's writings created awareness about the conditions in the factories causing diseases.

44. Parliamentary Papers, 'First Report of the Lords' Committee on the Sweating System together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Ministers of Evidence and Appendices.
45. Justice, 26 May 1888.
46. Justice, 7 July 1888.
The female hands eat their food in the rooms in which they worked so that the fumes of the phosphorous mixed with their poor meal and they would eat disease as seasoning to their bread. Moreover, they carried great stacks of boxes on their heads to the great detriment of their hair and spines.47

She collected more evidence through surveys and investigations which revealed that shareholders of these companies were mostly clergymen. This is evident from Annie's article in the *Link* which unmasked their double dealing.

"Country clergymen with shares in Bryant and May... buy watches from Wilson and Palmer who treated their workers more humanely"  

She roused the public anger against the share holders through her articles. As a result of it customers started refusing to buy their matches. According to Annie's article 'The Tissue of Lies' the owners in order to penalise the workers slyly wrote to manufacturers in neighbouring towns to inquire about the average pay paid to them and what section of the Truck Act prohibited fines being deducted from wages.

The immediate consequence of this article was that many girls were dismissed. Its positive result was that she helped them to form the 'Matchmakers Union' and to secure better working conditions for the match girls who not knowing what to do came straight to her for help. After protracted discussions terms were laid down by which "all fines were abolished, increase in the rate for piece work; provision for a breakfast room and grievances to be reported to the Managing Director."

47. *Link*, 23 June 1888.  
49. *Ibid*.  
50 *Link*, 21 July 1888.
The fame that came to her for organising the Match Makers Union brought her appeals for help from tin box makers, dockers and other factory workers. The significance of Besant's act of organising Match Makers Union can be judged from the fact that a network of labour unions were set up after 1888 throughout Britain.

Her identification with the workers made her a leader of the workers. Her work for public causes brought her into limelight and made her into a prominent public figure because it was one of the largest and poorest districts of the School Board. People wanted to utilise her potentialities for the cause of education which was another social issue. Thus on the appeal of the people she contested the "Tower Hamlet districts of the London School Board". She reflected her socialist leanings in her proposal for re-orienting school education. For example she advocated "free secular compulsory technical education for all, in order to break down class divisions and to lay a basis for real equality." In the course of her election campaign she wrote that "The common school system is the foundation of true democracy.... If appointed she would appoint working men and women as managers of School Boards rather than firms who treat work people unfairly and pay less than trade union rates."

51 Justice, 3 November 1888.
52 Justice, 17 November 1888.
53 Ibid.
She won by a very large majority and wrote in the *National Reformer* "Ten years ago under a cruel law ... Christian bigotry robbed me of my little child and now the care of 763,680 children of London is placed partly in my hands." This extract reveals the contradictions in English law which was bound by Christianity. Christian laws being rigid at that time forbade Annie to keep Mabel because of her being a free thinker and now after ten years when she was a Socialist leader the same law allowed her the custody of London school children. As far as her views on school education were concerned, she advocated the integration of moral instruction and training with the syllabus. She was not in favour of teaching a particular religion. Since the issue of religion had created discord in her married life and intellectual ferment she advocated a secular religion.

It may be pointed out that on this issue Annie had clashed with her contemporaries. In a conservative and orthodox society she spoke on atheism. Her writings as an editor and proprietress throw a lot of light on the changes which she underwent.

Her early childhood having been spent in misery and poverty made her aware of the value of sharing and understanding the needs of others. Being a dreamy child, colourful things attracted her and she developed a romantic bent of mind. Her unhappy married life taught her the futility of it and the fight for judicial separation made her an emotionally strong person. These hard blows taught her to face life boldly and she instead

54. *National Reformer*, 8 November 1885.
of indulging in self pity developed her creative talent for writing.

Her journalistic writings exposed her to further criticism of her conceptualization and solution of social problems which was conducive to her intellectual growth. She came under the spell of the particular person with whom she happened to work closely at a point of time. For example, her association with Bradlaugh made her a Freethinker and influence of Aveling made her a Socialist. Her main ideal was to work for the poor and the downtrodden. She took up public issues in her writings and spoke on them. She struggled to achieve what she wanted for her people. Thus she was a public figure in England before she came to India.

At this point I must raise an important question: What attracted her to India? It seems her marked interest in symbols, rituals, incense, spiritual imaginations, saints, myths, magic, reincarnation and karma compelled her to search for a new channel for religious thought which could perhaps be located in India. Her reading of H.P.Blavatsky’s book The Secret Doctrine for writing a review article proved to be a decisive factor in intensifying her attraction, for the spiritual heritage of India. Another question may also be raised: Why did she shift her centre of activity to India? Her interest in India may have been roused due to anti-British feelings as an Irish woman who had read about the persistent hostility and tension between these two countries. This was illustrated by her advice to Indians, not to fight for the British in the First World War. Her interest in
India began to reflect in her writing's as early as November 1878. In her article "England, India and Afghanistan: A Plea for the Weak against the Strong" published in the National Reformer, edited by Charles Bradlaugh in which she criticised the British Government for getting itself involved in a ferocious Afghan war, to counter the perennial Russian danger.

Throughout her stay in India, she grew aware of the exploitative character of the foreign rule in India and became convinced that the 'Un-British' rule by the bureaucracy in her 'adopted home' was dwarfing the Indian character. Her adverse reaction to political slavery of India was yet another factor which was chiefly responsible for her deep and active involvement in Indian affairs. Her being an Irish woman and her historical knowledge of the violent relationship between England and Ireland influenced her perception of the British rule in India. She was "...an old Soldier of liberty", and could not stand aside and thus joined the political campaign not to lead but to take risks. Thus having received all the necessary grooming she came well - fortified in India ready to face the onslaughts of the un-British rule of the bureaucracy.

Annie Besant's work in India can be broadly divided into four phases.

1. From 1893 - 1898 - Religious
2. From 1898 - 1903 - Educational
3. From 1903 - 1913 - Social
4. From 1913 onwards - Political

Through religious, educational and social work she tried to restore among the Indian people faith in their own great

55. New India, 4 April 1917, p.12.
religion and traditions. Due to the creation of hostile conditions by the British Government in India she found it rather trying and difficult to proceed on with her mission. Sensing that a change in political set up alone could facilitate the fulfillment of her mission, she plunged herself neck-deep into the whirlwind of active Indian politics in 1914. Since her arrival she managed with terrific speed to accomplish much by 1917. The rich seed of the idea of united India had taken deep root and the next twenty years spent only as an extension of this thought. The Theosophical Society, which facilitated Annie Besant's entry into India and provided the base-point for launching her life-long quest for true Hinduism, shall be the focus of discussion in the next chapter.