

ROLE OF ANNIE BESANT TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Annie Besant was an Irish political activist, free-thinker and Fabian socialist. After embracing Theosophy under the tutelage of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian mystic, Besant embarked on her mission of propagating theosophical ideals, and reached the shores of India in 1893. However, in India Hinduism fascinated her to such an extent that she devoted herself to promoting Hinduism. She toured the length and breadth of India, and lectured intensely on the lofty ideals of Hinduism. However, Besant was of the opinion that absence of religious education in government schools and colleges and teaching of Christianity in missionary educational institutions was responsible for religious neutrality and scepticism among Hindu youth, and hence the fallen state of Hinduism. To remedy this state, she emphasised the need for its revival, and propagated the idea that religious education of Hindu youths should become an integral part of their education.

Key Words: religious education; depressed classes.

INTRODUCTION

Annie Besant before she arrived India, she had a won public recognition as a great leader in the west and other parts of the world, by her outstanding oratorical skill, her writings on religious, social, philosophical and political work. Her active and tireless work in several fields for human freedom and sympathy for poor and downtrodden was well known. During the period of first twenty years of her life in India between 1893 to 1913, she did relentless work in various fields like education, religious and society. She was also the co-editor of the National Reformer which was the main instrument for propaganda of 'Free Thought' from National Secular Society. She wrote many articles, books and pamphlets on politics and free thought during 1874-'88. She wrote, Atonement, Eternal Torture, Natural and Revealed Religion and on similar subjects. Annie Besant tried to create a suitable atmosphere for Indians who thought and worked for the awakening of India, who strived hard for the revival of Indian Culture and who strongly pleaded for the political upliftment of the Indians, and for their rights, and liberties, the name of Mrs. Annie Besant figures like a beacon of light. she toiled for the regeneration of the country and rendered relentless service for the educational, social and political progress of India's teeming millions. In order to develop education both the individual and social conscience.

OBJECTIVES

This study has the following objectives:

- * To study the role of theosophical education and its impact.
- * To bring out the origin and development of National Education.

THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Mrs. Annie Besant, who joined the Theosophical Society in 1888, visited India for the first time in 1893 after fulfilling her obligations, public and personal, in England, to deliver lectures in Theosophical Society's Convention, dedicating her life to the service of India. Mrs. Besant tried hard to fight against all injustices before she joined the Theosophical Society. After becoming a Theosophist, Mrs. Besant, adopted Theosophy as her faith, humanity remained her surging passion. Before Madame Blavatsky's death in 1891, she appointed Mrs. Annie Besant to succeed her as head of the Esoteric School. On Col. Olcott's death in 1907, she was elected President of the Theosophical Society. She filled both offices until her death in 1933. Realizing the meaning and vision of Theosophy in life she expressed once very clearly thus:

I had gone into spiritualism, I went into it again ... But I got no real satisfaction until I got the Secret Doctrine, ... I had long been deeply troubled as to the 'beyond' of all my efforts at social and political reform. My own socialism was that of Love, there was much Socialism that was of hatred, and I often wondered if out of hatred any true improvement could Spring.... Here, Theosophy, with its proof of the higher nature in man came as a ray of light, and its teaching of the training of that nature gave solid ground for hope ... that its call to limitless self-sacrifice for human goal.

She was very much taken up by the spiritual heritage of India after she came to India for the first time in 1893, Mrs. Besant began to try to awaken Indians to the glory of their heritage, to call forth from them the self-respect which has been generally smothered by the attitude and exploitation of their western rulers. During all those years, "she worked for educational opportunity for them, for better labour conditions, for the revival and uplifting of eastern faiths especially Hinduism, to better conditions of Indian women and lift their status to something near what it had been in the days of India's past greatness." For this end she wanted to educate the Indians.

THEOSOPHICAL EDUCATION

The Theosophical education institution was started in the year 1879 by Col. Henry Steel Olcott, founder of Theosophical Society. The great aim of education was to bring out of the child to turn all his abilities, his powers, his capacities and to help the community. The Olcott Harijana Free Schools were started for education of the children of the panchamas. He always strove for the upliftment of the underprivileged and rejected classes in the society. Therefore he himself started a free school in June 1894 for imparting elementary education in Tamil and with conversational English to the panchama children near Society's head quarter at Adyar. The first school building was the Olcott school, started in a small mud hut with forty-five children. The school grew and five other schools were started under the name of 'the Olcott Panchama Free Schools' in Adyar, Madras, with financial contributions from the members of the society. After the death of Col. Olcott in 1907, Mrs. Annie Besant made number of reforms in Theosophical Society.

Mrs. Besant said "the education must be made to fit the needs of the child, not the child be made to fit the education". The object of education is to make him as fit as his nature to make the best of what is there in him, to find out the real qualities and capacities of the child and

understand him. The education should fit to the child but not force the child into a system which does not fit him.

In order to develop education both the individual and social conscience Mrs. Annie Besant suggested that youth should learn to realize the difference between the laws of nature and laws of man and pay his duty to himself and the country. She found that those who had modern education on western lines were beginning to be materialistic and looked down on their ancient faith with indifference. They were carried away by the glamour of western civilization, and apologetic about their own national culture. She awakened the people of India to the glory of their heritage, to the splendour of their own ancient civilization and faith.

Basically her plan of education had two distinct aspects: One was the religious foundation and the other was patriotism or love of the Mother Land. Mrs. Annie Besant clearly pointed that “the education must be founded on a knowledge of the past of the country as well as its present; must be designed in accordance with the ancient traditions and national habits and adapted to modern necessities, to meet at every point of an ever-increasing nation. Mrs. Annie Besant was deeply interested in imparting a purely secular education to young Indians on the basis of their deep philosophy and liberal Hindu culture”.

The four-fold system of education for boys and girls as envisaged by Annie Besant reveals a few significant aspects of the system of education under Theosophy. The division of education into religious, emotional (moral and mental), physical and environmental subjects provides holistic approach to the development of the student's personality. The inclusion of physical education as a compulsory item in the curriculum is significant and was totally new in the contemporary English schools in India.

The concept of four-fold education under Theosophy provided the much required scope for the development of physical, mental and emotional character of students. In doing so, Theosophy's main objective and cherished ideal viz to train students as future citizens would be achieved. In fact, this holistic approach to education of children was absent in the contemporary society where Theosophical education would definitely score a point. For Theosophy, education was not a mere academic exercise. Rather, it was considered as “a system which would be get future citizens empowered with knowledge and upright personality to serve the society with a touch of humanity”. As Mrs. Besant suggested the scheme of education should be patriotic and wholly swadeshi but not divorced from the essence of religion. She wanted that Indian orientalism be meticulously moulded by the scientific knowledge of the Occident, and the final goal was the production of well-cultured society. Religion was made the most important plank of education and the youth were trained for social work as a preparation for service to the motherland through such organisation as sons and daughters of India. Therefore Scouts, Guards of Honour and cadets of the school and college, were created.

NATIONAL EDUCATION

Mrs. Annie Besant started Central Hindu College on 7 July 1898 at Benaras. As she was naturally attracted to the deep philosophy of Hinduism, she made her home at Benaras and lectured throughout the length and breadth of India on the religious education of the youth of the country. The result of her teachings was not confined merely to the development of that spirit in the college founded by her, but it spread far and wide and to restore revival of

nationalism. Mrs. Besant herself offered to work for the renaissance of Hinduism and to the rebirth of the old system of Indian education. The Central Hindu College was the educational centre with the object of imparting sound secular education, combined with moral and religious instruction, based on the fundamental tenets of Hinduism. The Central Hindu College was affiliated to the Allahabad University. Mrs. Arthur Richardson was appointed as the first Principal of the college. The aims of the college were clearly stated that it would be "religious secular" college teaching the deep truths of Hindu religion and seeking to unite the best Hindu culture with the best of Western principles of education. The success of this college was phenomenal. The Students attended from all parts of the country. The staff were similarly recruited and included many Europeans and made it as a great centre of Hindu learning and Indian patriotism. Mrs. Besant published text books on Hinduism entitled the 'Sanathana Dharma Series' with the help of Dr. Bhagavan Das.

Education of Lower Castes and Depressed Classes

The Hindu social order denied education to lower castes and depressed classes. The advent of modern education opened, to some extent, the doors of knowledge to these sections of population. There was, however, a general resistance among upper castes towards the education of these classes because of the fear that once educated the lower caste people will leave their ancestral occupation and compete for government jobs with them. Besant's ideas towards education of lower castes were no different from those of the upper caste elite. The schools established by Besant for the education of high caste children had magnificent buildings but for the education of rural masses she suggested rudimentary schools as these could be raised by village labour. The elementary education of masses, in Besant's scheme, consisted only of 3 or 4 years starting from 5 to 8 or 9 years. After this stage, she remarked, the great mass of labouring population should pass into the practical training necessary for the efficient discharge of the craft by which they are, in the future, to serve their country and to earn their own living, winning prosperity alike for India and for themselves.

Regarding secondary education, she suggested, secondary education was not for the boys and girls whose future lies in handicrafts, in agriculture, in domestic and small shop-assistant service, in factories, in the lowest ranks of the petty officials-policemen, soldiers, office peons, chowkidars, and the like. By advocating the inclusion of «sowing seeds, caring for plants, basket making, learning to saw, to hammer and to make village tools» at the elementary level and of the practical training in the ancestral crafts» after elementary level in the curriculum of masses and by denying them secondary education, Besant attempted to reinforce the socio-economic inequalities in the caste ridden Indian society which would forbid the masses any choice for their career keeping them adhered to their ancestral jobs or the jobs assigned to them by their caste.

This scheme of Besant resembled the «two-tier system advocated by the landed elites and Indian leaders who proposed that curriculum for masses should be different from those of upper class. For instance, Peary Mohan Mukerjee, argued in opposition to introduction of compulsory education as, Government should aim to make the masses into useful members of the society like servants, shepherds, apprentices and not scholars as the educate mock at all distinctions of caste, wealth and lineage which had enthralled them for centuries .

Similarly Tilak argued that the curriculum taught to upper caste children was unsuitable to peasant children...and rational system of education meant teaching of only those subjects which would be necessary for their living and he insisted that lower classes should be trained as carpenters, lacksmiths, masons and tailors. As far as education of the so called untouchables was concerned Besant advocated for separate schools for them. She condemned those who were favouring common schools for upper caste and untouchable children, A difficulty arises at the outset, for one class of community, moved by a noble feeling of compassion and benevolence, but not adding thereto a careful and detailed consideration of the conditions, demands for the children of the pariah community admission to the schools frequented by the sons of the higher classes, and charges with lack of brotherhood those who are not in favour of this policy. It becomes, therefore, necessary to ask whether brotherhood is to mean leveling down, and whether it is usual in a family to treat elder children and the babies in exactly the same way though she talked of brotherhood (one of the tenets of Theosophy), but for her Brotherhood does not mean identity, and brotherhood does not imply a flat dead level of absolute similarity and so called equality. With such a notion of brotherhood she criticized the idea of equal treatment of the depressed classes with that of upper castes. According to her, It is a zeal not according to knowledge- and not according to nature which would substitute equality for brotherhood, and demand from the culture and refined that they should forfeit the hardly won fruits of the education of generations, in order to create an artificial equality, as disastrous to the progress of the future as it would be useless for the improvement of the present. She propagated the idea that if the upper caste treats depressed classes equally then it is not brotherhood but lowering down the status of the former.

Therefore, in order to bring about the uplift of depressed classes, according to her, the higher caste should not go down from their level rather depressed classes should be raised to the level of former and Education, she opined, is the level by which we may hope to raise them [the depressed classes] (Besant but in separate schools. In support of her argument for a separate school for the depressed classes she said, Their [depressed class children] bodies, at present, are ill odorous and foul, with the liquor and strong smelling foods out of which for generations they have been built up; it will need some generations of purer food and living to make their bodies fit to sit in the close neighborhood of a school room with children who have received bodies from an ancestry trained in habits of exquisite personal cleanliness, and fed on pure foodstuffs. We have to raise the depressed classes to a similar level of physical purity, not to drag down the clean to the level of the dirty, and until this is done the close association is undesirable Justifying her stance, she argued, since the children of “depressed classes” are dirty they need to be cleaned, therefore first daily lessons for these children should be a bath which cannot be done in the higher caste schools where children come after taking bath and well fed class. She further argued that since children learn by imitation, so in a common school with higher caste children, the higher caste children would imitate the bad habits of the depressed class children. In her own words, Children learn manner chiefly by imitation...if at the school they are to be made to associate with children not thus trained, they will quickly fall into the ways which they see around them....Ought the children of families in which good manners and courtesy are hereditary, to be robbed of their heritage, a robbery that enriches no one, but drags the whole nation down? However, the significant point here is that, if the children learn by

imitation then this would be equally true the other way round in case of depressed class children also. That is, in a common school the depressed class children may learn good habits by imitating the higher caste children, so a common school would be far more effective than separate. Exemplifying from England, she noted, In England it has been never been desirable to educate girls and boys of all classes side by side, and such grotesque equalising of the unequal would be scouted.

EDUCATION OF GIRLS

In 1904, Besant wrote a pamphlet on *The Education of Indian Girls* to serve as «the basis of a national movement for education of girls. In this pamphlet she gave a detailed outline of the content of «Indian' girls education. Annie Besant's Ideas on education of girls were highly gendered. Her views on girls' education echoed the prevalent patriarchal hegemony of the orthodox Hindu society. Though she advocated for the education of girls «but there was a lack of real commitment. Of hundreds of lectures which she delivered in India on education only two to three lectures were dedicated to the girls' education. Even these lectures were heavily laden with gendered notion with regard to the nature of education suitable for girls. She favoured such an education for Indian girls that would prepare her for her future role as a housewife. She was completely against that education of girls which would make her competent for getting a job in Government department. Besant presumed the future life of an Indian girl within the confines of household therefore she advocated for a brief period of school life for Indian girls with no exposure to western field of knowledge.

She prescribed a curriculum for girls' education consisting of Religious and moral education, literary education, scientific education, artistic education and physical education in accordance with her future role of an ideal homemaker. Another important part of the curriculum of girls' education, according to Besant was, artistic education such as needle work, music, playing veena, singing, embroidery, drawing, painting so that leisure in later life may be pleasantly and adequately filled...and to add greatly to the charm of home.

She opined, The singing of stotras, to an accompaniment on the Vina, or other instrument, is a refining and delightful art in which the girls take the great pleasure and one which enables them to add greatly to the charm of home. Drawing and painting are arts in which some find delight, and their deft fingers readily learn exquisite embroidery and needle work of all kinds. Needless to say that all should learn sewing, darning and the cutting of such made garments as are used in their district. In all of these, the natural taste of the pupil should be the guide to the selection of the art, though almost all, probably, will take part in singing.

The physical education for girls prescribed by her was narrowed down to the delicate movement of body suited to the very character of a «girl». For boys she prescribed Indian and western exercises and different types of sports but these had no place in the physical education for girls. She opined,

In southern India, the girls are very fond of their own songs, performing often complicated exercises, in some of which patterns are woven and unwoven in coloured threads attached to a centre high overhead, the ends of the thread being held by the girls, whose evolutions make and unmake the pattern... Nothing is prettier than to see a group of girls moving gracefully to

the sound of their own young voices, in and out, in mazy evolutions, with clapping of soft palms or clash of light playing sticks.

CONCLUSION

Though Besant was a Theosophist and had come to India to spread Theosophical ideals of Universal Brotherhood of all religions but her admiration for Hindu religion made her heavily inclined towards it. Her belief that Hindu religion was in a fallen state due to the absence of religious teaching in schools and colleges led to the establishment of an institution only (later on mainly) for Hindu boys where religion was to be an indispensable part of their education. The importance laid on the religious education of Hindu youths was a discordant note in the sense that it would further enhance the gulf between various religions in the society, particularly between Muslim and Hindus. Orthodox Hindu ideals and Victorian ideals of making a good wife and a good mother. She advocated for the limited aim of girls' education within the purview of Purdah (seclusion) norms. The girl child was the chief victim of customary child marriage but ironically Besant took no initiative to curb this practice, though in boys' school she had devised the rule of no admission of married boys.

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