

ANNIE BESANT'S MANY LIVES

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South Asian countries are perhaps unique in the world in being able to attract Western women who became renowned for their work in local political, social, cultural and religious movements, and as partners of male political leaders and religious gurus. One thinks today of the phenomenon of Sonia Gandhi, treated as a possible saviour of the Congress Party; of Mother Teresa (who in spite of her reactionary politics and attitudes) was given a state funeral; of the influence of Mira Alfassa the Jewish Mother of Pondichery and her partner Aurobindo; of the English Admiral's daughter Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade) devotee of Gandhi; of Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble) the Irish radical and disciple of Swami Vivekananda; of two Americans, Agnes Smedley and Evelyn (Trent) Roy and their influence on the early Indian Communist movement during their years with Virendranath Chattopadhyaya and M.N.Roy respectively; of England-born Doreen (Young) Wickremasinghe who entered the Sri Lanka parliament as a Communist M.P., and of Alys (George) Faiz of London, widow of the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and her work in Pakistan's progressive movement.

But perhaps most of all we remember the charismatic Annie Besant (1847-1933), who as her biographers have noted, led many lives. Up to the age of 44, she was clergyman's wife, atheist campaigner, socialist propagandist, trade union agitator, birth control promoter, critic of capitalism and colonialism and a fighter for women's rights. To Socialists and feminists she had two lives; the years upto 1891, which they consider the most important phase and her "Indian phase" from 1893 to her death in 1933 - which was more problematic. In 1890 Besant became absorbed with Theosophy and succeeded Helena Blavatsky as the President of the Theosophical Society. It was one of the strangest "about turns" in modern history. The secretary of the Fabian Society was appalled; he cut out her name from the list of members with a comment "Gone to Theosophy". Sidney Webb, the British Fabian Socialist, called Annie Besant "one of the 19th century most remarkable women"; to Bernard Shaw she was the greatest woman public speaker; and the Indian political activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya referred to her as "one of the most outstanding world figures of her time."

Some leaders are best known and remembered for their achievements in the latter part of their lives. But others are honoured for their early idealistic, courageous years before the "betrayal," "compromise", "sell out" or radical change of belief. For socialists and feminists, Annie Besant's early life was memorable but her latter years as a Theosophist were an aberration if not an embarrassment. There is regret that Annie Besant did not stay on in Britain, lead the Labour Party, fight for democratic rights at home and in the colonies, and blaze the trail for women's liberation around the world.

Instead she got caught up in Blavatsky and Theosophy, in romanticizing and celebrating of Vedic "Aryan" India, in decoding "messages" from the Tibetan Master Koot Hoomi, and grooming a young boy from Andhra to be the World Leader and head of the Order of the Star of the East.

The Militant Years - Scandal upon Scandal

Annie Besant, nee Wood was born in England in 1847 to an upper middle class family. Her mother was Irish and her father half Irish. His death meant that the family were without an income and family savings were spent on the son's education at school and university. This was Annie's first taste of British patriarchy at work where sons got priority, and the impoverished daughters had few choices except marriage. Aged 21, Annie married an Anglican priest, Frank Besant and had a son and daughter. She soon developed doubts about both Christianity and bourgeois marriage and left for London with her daughter in 1873 to lead the life of an independent woman, moving around among dissidents, progressives, and free thinkers.

This was the beginning of the many scandals she caused in Victorian Britain. It was an era of disbelief, of challenges to Christianity and the increasing popularity of Darwin's theories. Annie Besant created a stir by publicly proclaiming herself an atheist, joining the National Secular Society. Along with Britain's foremost atheist, Charles Bradlaugh, she travelled around the country preaching atheism and free thought; they jointly wrote a Free Thinker's Text Book which denounced Christianity for "having set itself against all popular advancement, all civil and social progress, all improvement in the condition of the masses." In 1876 Besant wrote the Gospel of Atheism, in which she said "an Atheist is one of the grandest titles ... it is the Order of Merit of the World's heroes... Copernicus, Spinoza, Voltaire, Paine, Priestly". Both this book and the Free-thinkers Text Book were popular among the local intelligentsia in India and Sri Lanka. The "scandal" surrounding Besant and Bradlaugh grew when in 1877 they republished a pamphlet on birth control that had earlier been declared obscene. They were prosecuted but won the case making birth control a topic of popular debate.

In 19th century Britain, a woman had few rights in marriage and was legally a chattel of her husband. The child custody case Besant had with her husband led her to campaign on the archaic marriage and custody laws. During her case, the judge objected to Besant defending herself, and as Nethercot writes, was "perturbed that a woman was thus exposing herself before lawyers, journalists, spectators and the nation". In 1879, Besant wrote a pamphlet "Marriage as it

was, as it is and as it should be" denouncing all the unequal laws governing British women. She lost child custody on grounds of her atheism but her trial created much debate among liberal circles, eventually leading to changes in the repressive laws.

One of the feminists inspired movements all round the globe in the 19th century was that of female education and access by women to male-dominated universities. By the 1870s, London University admitted women and Annie Besant attempted to study for a Science degree. But in spite of her successes at the first examinations, she faced much petty harassment at the final examination, being told by one examiner that he would not pass her because of her atheism and immoral political activities.

By the 1880s, Annie Besant was a notorious figure in Britain. Along with Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb and others in the Fabian Society she lectured on the need for Socialism, trade unionism and Home Rule for Ireland. She wrote popular political pamphlets, an influential one being "Why I am a Socialist". Besant was also outspoken against war, capital punishment and flogging; she criticized the House of Lords and royalty. And as she wrote of herself in 1883:

I was ... a passionate opponent of all injustice to nations weaker than ourselves, so that I found myself always in opposition to the Government of the day, against our aggressive and oppressive policy in Ireland, in the Transvaal, in India, in Afghanistan, in Burma, in Egypt. I lifted up my voice in all our great towns, trying to touch the conscience of the people, and to make them feel the immorality of a land-stealing, piratical policy...

The Match Workers' Strike

Besant's sympathies for exploited workers and especially women workers was an important feature of her politics. She wrote on "White Slavery in London" (in 1888) describing the appalling conditions of women match workers of the Bryant and May factories. She distributed this article, along with roses, to the women, subsequently led them out on strike and formed the Match Workers Union. This got instant support from radicals as well as great publicity in the press, and ended in concessions from the employers. She was also active in the following wave of industrial strife. Besant was one of the organizers of the famous Bloody Sunday mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square in 1888, the numerous working class and Socialist groups to defy the closing of the Square to popular protest meetings. Bernard Shaw referred to Besant as the "heroine of Trafalgar Square" for her courage in defiance of police assaults and shooting.

Thus by 1890, Annie Besant had become Britain most famous woman orator and agitator and a great inspiration to socialists, trade unionists, and intellectuals in the colonies, and to feminists of the incipient movement for female franchise. At the height of her fame as a radical, and after many years of battles on a wide range of issues challenging the establishment of Church, State and employers, as well as her defiance of various patriarchal institutions and male dominated practices, she made a sharp and drastic change in her life.

She joined Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophists and very rapidly (by 1891) became the President of the Theosophical Society. As her old friend G.W.Foote, editor of the *Freethinker* wrote in disbelief "at one leap she left atheism and materialism and plunged into the depths of the wildest pantheism and spiritualism".

In the next forty years from 1893 Annie Besant was absorbed in the Theosophical Society in Madras. The past was erased; she withdrew her pamphlet on birth control, (on grounds that the practice was incompatible with re-incarnation) ceased to be involved in the Socialist and trade union movements and found it inappropriate to speak up loudly on women's rights in India.

"Gone to Theosophy"

The occult, spiritualist and theosophical movements of the late 19th century had attracted many women and produced outstanding women leaders - especially Blavatsky and Besant. Alex Owen, writing on spiritualism has said that "The discourse of spirit has long been a means of articulating subversive ideas", noting that though not all feminists of the 19th century were spiritualists, most spiritualist movements advocated women's rights. Theosophy was attractive for its radical thrust against the Church and State, challenging not only the claims for universalism and superiority made for Christianity and Western civilization, out also speaking out on the brotherhood of man, opposing colonialism, accepting "difference" in culture and religion and advancing the idea of perfect equality for women and men.

This was the radical aspect of Theosophy that appealed to South Asian nationalists including Gandhi, Nehru and Krishna Menon. But the Theosophists also had another spiritual agenda. Some communicated with the "Masters" in Tibet for guidance; others like Blavatsky mesmerised people with "occult phenomena" (table raps, tinkling bells and the materialization of objects), while they all uncritically romanticized and idealized Hindu and Buddhist practices and cultures, including sometimes the caste system.

Critics of Theosophy abounded, especially among those whom Annie Besant had left behind in London. The *National Reformer* said that Theosophists were "very good, very respectable and very mad"; Richard Hodgson called Blavatsky "one of the most accomplished ... and interesting imposters in history" and T.W. Rhys Davids, the Pali scholar, claimed that Theosophists "based their ideas on the medieval alchemists which they mix up with a little misunderstood Indian thought". And the American critic H.L.Mencken speculated on the appeal of Theosophy and the "Hooey from the Orient" to intelligent western women. But not all intellectual women were interested in Theosophy; Beatrice Webb for example called it "a wonderful fairy tale".

Besant's Passage to India

In 1893 Annie Besant visited India and Sri Lanka to promote Theosophy and start schools for girls. But she soon succumbed to the warning given by "thoughtful Indians," that female education was suspect because Pandita Ramabai, a convert

to Christianity, had used the education of child widows for purposes of conversion. "The unhappy perversion of an Indian lady" said Annie Besant "had shaken the confidence of the Hindu public with respect to girls' education, and they feared Christian proselytizing under the garb of interest in education". Instead she concentrated on boys' education and started a modern school for Hindu boys in 1898 (the Central Hindu College in Benares). By 1904 Besant turned to female education and wrote on the topic of "The Education of Indian Girls". But her views were traditional; she spoke of the ancient Hindu ideal, even quoting from the laws of Manu, and discouraged modern education for Indian girls.

That is not the kind of education you need. It would not build up women of the ancient Aryan type ... I presume that no Hindus... desire to educate their daughters, and then send them out into the world to struggle with men for gaining a livelihood

Annie Besant became known and respected in India for her championing of the Home Rule movement, even before Gandhi and Nehru had entered politics. She was part of a deputation to Britain in 1914 to present the case for political reform. On her return she launched a Home Rule League (in 1915) linking it to the Indian National Congress. She acquired the Madras Standard and turned it into the New India, to campaign for self-government. The government arrested and detained her for three months, causing a furor in India and abroad, making her a national heroine. By 1917 she was elected President of the Indian National Congress — an extraordinary achievement for a woman and a foreigner. But she had political differences with Indian nationalists like Gandhi and only gave qualified support to civil disobedience. The militant Tilak criticising Theosophy and Besant's dependence on the Masters, (mahatmas) wrote "Congress recognises no Mahatmas to rule over it except the Mahatma of the majority". By the 1920s Besant became disillusioned with Congress politics and directed her energies to Theosophy and Jeddu Krishnamurthi.

Born in 1896, Krishnamurti had been befriended at Adyar by Besant and another theosophist C.W. Leadbeater, who had been on the look out for the coming World Teacher. In 1910, aged 14, the boy Messiah allegedly wrote *At the Feet of the Master*, inspired by the "Master". Criticism in the press was inevitable. Dr. Nanjunda Rao said it was "very silly... to deify an English woman, be she ever so clever... when she offers as an object of worship the little Hindu boy". The columns of the Hindu were filled with such protests. One comment was that "only fools or madmen could believe in this 20th century that the boy Krishnamurti is an incarnation of the divinity".

In spite of criticism, Krishnamurti and the "Order of the Star of the East" gained some support in India, Europe and the USA, claiming 12,000 members in 1913. But the World Teacher changed his mind and in 1929 disbanded the Order and renounced any claim to be a Messiah. Besant was demoralised by the debacle; her health declined and she died aged 86 in 1933.

There have been many differing opinions on her life and work. To Christians and missionaries she was the she-devil incarnate; espousing atheism in her youth and praising Hinduism in her later life. As Pandita Ramabai wrote in 1904 "Sometimes it looks as if the world is going backwards, when one hears an English woman like Mrs. Besant declaring that the Hindu widows should never marry again." The liberal reformists Indians were also critical. The editor of the Hindu, Subramania Aiyar, wrote in 1893,

We must decline to concur in Mrs. Besant's wholesale condemnation of Western civilization...but if nothing else, it is superior to that of the East in being able to produce women of the courage of conviction which have made Mrs. Besant and many others of her sex a power for good... Hindu civilization is yet to produce a woman of the stamp of the talented lady...and until it does...we...cannot appropriate for Hinduism the praises which Mrs. Besant so generously lavished on our ancestors.

But to socialist feminists - Besant remains an important figure for her pioneer contributions. What is interesting to note is that as her biographer Arthur Nethercot wrote, she knew "how to wear sandals in India and shoes in the rest of the world." In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala also noticed this difference and said that while Besant was preaching "gentleness and obedience" to Indians, she supported the militant suffragettes in England.

Besant moved cautiously on feminist issues in India - calling for female education, an end to seclusion and supporting female franchise — but she put nationalism before feminism and refused to include women's suffrage in the platform of the Home Rule League. This was Annie Besant in India. But Besant on a visit to London wrote that "the only live movement in the world today is the Women's Movement", and in a lecture in London on "Women and Politics" in 1914 she recalled her earlier commitment on women's suffrage and said "For forty years and more women have been claiming justice; for forty years and more justice has been denied".

From the point of view of Theosophists of course, there was no inconsistency for each country is said to work out its own destiny and religious culture. This could be a daring view in a period of colonialism — that Europe had no civilizing mission to impose on others. But for women, such views could legitimize existing oppression and glorify those structures that feminists and reformers were trying to change. As I have written elsewhere,

From the local women's point of view, the foreign women's idealization of Indian patriarchy was harmful, while to traditional Hindu males, it was a godsend. No wonder, therefore, that the white goddess found her place in Indian society and that a suburb of Madras is named Besant Nagar.

Courtesy Frontline.

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