



ANNIE BESANT'S VIEWS ON GIRLS EDUCATION- A PATHWAY FOR LIBERATION AND UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Annie Besant was an Irish woman who came to India as a Theosophist. In the second decade of the Twentieth Century she involved in the Indian politics and started the Home Rule Movement in Madras in 1916 and this moved posed a great threat to the mere existence of the British rule in India. She was arrested for the anti-British activities and on her release for jail, she was elected as the first woman president of the Indian National Congress. She started New India and Commonweal the two newspapers which served as the mouthpieces of the Home Rule Movement. To strengthen the Nationalist Movement, she insisted the participation of the women in Indian politics. To gather the women of India, she started the Women Indian Association (W.I.A.) along with a few frontline women leaders of Tamil Nadu. After starting the W.I.A., she realized the importance of the girls' education and spread her views by delivering lectures, issuing pamphlets and writings through the newspapers. She even wrote books which glorified India and stressed the need of the improvement of the girls' education in Tamil region. Her contribution to the progress of women is immense. As a great woman leader of the Indian Nationalist Woman, she became very popular in the second decade of the Twentieth Century. She considered the girls' education is the only way to attain the emancipation of the women who suffered from social ills for a long period. To break social barriers, she started schools and educational institutions for the girls and through them she awakened the girls of the Tamil region to a large extent.



KEYWORDS: Annie Besant, Girls, Home Rule Movement, Education, Theosophical Society, Panchama School, Banaras, Tamil Region.

INTRODUCTION

Annie Besant played a leading role in the women movement and the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu and India. Arrival of Annie Besant was considered the dawn of the awakening of women in India. She was joined by Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa who brought a sea change in the activities of the women in Tamil region. They collectively brought an awakening among the women in challenging

the evil practices faced by the women themselves. Following the pathways laid by Annie Besant, the women leaders like Muthulakshmi Reddy, Hirabai Tata, Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sister Subbulakshmi, Lady Sadasiva Iyer, Ambujammal, Radhabai Subbarayan, Rukmani Lakshmipathy, Sarojini Varadappan actively involved in the Nationalist Movement and they also brought a renaissance in the minds of the women by instilling girls' education and so there stated the women movement in India and it took recently emerged as a successful Feminist Movement.¹

Born in London on October 1st, 1847, to Irish parents², her given name was Anniewood. Although of Irish descent, she dedicated her life to the cause of Indians, particularly women and the oppressed. From a young age, she felt a deep calling to serve society, which ultimately led her to divorce her family after having two children with the Rev. Frank Besant.³ On November 16th, 1893, she arrived in India for the first time, landing at Tuticorin in the Madras Presidency⁴, and became an active member of the Theosophical Society, where she met Madame H.P. Blavatsky. Her passion for education led her to found the Central Hindu College in Banaras, which later became the Banaras Hindu University. After her election as president of the Theosophical Society in 1907, she established the headquarters of her social and political initiatives in Adyar.⁵

Annie Besant also devoted herself to social issues. The difficult circumstances faced by women and marginalized groups drove her to combat harmful social practices such as early marriage, the Devadasi system, and female illiteracy. She integrated religion with education. As a fervent advocate of girls' education, she promoted this cause by organizing conferences and committees across the country. She emphasized the need to prioritize the education of poor girls in rural areas. She also argued that education should be linked to employment opportunities.⁶ She urged parents to collaborate with social service organizations to enroll their daughters in schools. She recognized that wealthy families were often reluctant to send their children away from home, making it difficult to persuade them. Therefore, she encouraged less wealthy families to seize the opportunity of getting education. She was concerned about the growing number of uneducated girls, and so fought for the education among the illiterate girls.

There are eighty three values presented, which are referred to as the "Document on Social, Moral and Spiritual values. They are designed to be incorporated into school curricula to inculcate holistic development ⁷ These values were meticulously adhered to and advocated by Annie Besant. Given that the Theosophical Society has its own agenda for social reforms and the education of women in India, Mrs. Annie Besant made a call for the education of Indian Hindu girls.⁸

Consequently, the education of Hindu girls should align with national ideals; it must embrace the traditional Hindu views regarding the role of women in national life, rejecting the limited modern perspective in favor of the ancient ideal. It should recognize women as mothers and wives, or in some instances, as "Brahmavadhini" from earlier times.⁹ Drawing from these values, Annie Besant emphasized the importance of religious and moral education. She asserted that every Indian girl should be instructed in the fundamental tenets of her faith, using a clear and straightforward approach. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana, in local languages, should serve as primary resources for moral education. Girls should be taught to engage in worship, with simple and clear explanations of the rituals provided, and the natural devotion inherent in Indian women should be nurtured, complemented by an intelligent understanding and a pure, enlightened faith, which is their intrinsic heritage that should also be fostered within them.¹⁰

The Nationalist Movement aimed at the education of girls must align with the needs of the nation, as India requires well-trained wives and mothers, wise and compassionate leaders of the household, educated mentors for the youth, supportive advisors to their children and husbands, and proficient caregivers for the ill, rather than merely producing female graduates prepared for professional careers.

She also emphasized the importance of providing girls with a literary education. A solid understanding of the vernacular should be imparted, encompassing both reading and writing. The vernacular literature in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, and Tamil offers a wealth of original works and translations, providing ample opportunities for study and a rich source of enjoyment

during leisure time in later years. Additionally, a conversational proficiency in a vernacular language other than their own would be beneficial for a girl, should time permit her to acquire it. Furthermore, a classical language, such as Sanskrit or Arabic, should be learned adequately, depending on the girl's religious background.¹¹ She should also be encouraged to read and appreciate noble literature. It is essential to provide them with books that feature stories of the most remarkable and resilient women in Indian history, so that girls may draw inspiration from this exemplary model of womanhood and witness the glorious achievements that Indian women have attained.

Annie Besant also emphasized the importance of providing Scientific Education to girls. The principles of household hygiene should be thoroughly taught, including the significance of fresh air, sunlight, and meticulous cleanliness; these concepts were well understood and should be actively practiced. Additionally, it is crucial to have knowledge about the nutritional value of food and its effects on the body, particularly in relation to the development of muscular, nervous, and fatty tissues, as well as their stimulating or nutrient qualities. Every female child should possess some understanding of basic medicine, as she must be capable of addressing accidental injuries, managing minor ones completely, and handling serious cases sufficiently to prevent loss of life. A solid foundation in arithmetic is necessary for all household tasks, enabling quick and accurate calculations of quantities and prices, as well as maintaining household accounts.¹²

From an early age, women must receive an education; this is their fundamental need. The treasures of philosophy, literature, science, and more must be accessible to them. For every girl, religion should be both philosophical and scientific, and science should serve as a companion to religion. She will apply the truths she learns more effectively than men, as she is inherently a born administrator, just as man is a born legislator.¹³

According to Annie Besant, the knowledge of cooking should always be included in the education of Indian girls, as it provides little comfort. Instruction in some form of art should be an integral part of an Indian girl's education, allowing her leisure time to be filled pleasantly and adequately. The singing of 'Stotras' accompanied by the veena or other instruments is a refined and delightful art that brings great pleasure to the girls, enabling them to enhance the charm of their homes. Drawing and painting are arts that some girls find enjoyable, and their skilled fingers quickly learn exquisite artistic embroidery and various forms of needlework. It goes without saying that all girls should acquire skills in sewing, darning, and cutting out garments that are commonly used.¹⁴

The training and strengthening of future girls' bodies must not be overlooked, and to this end, appropriate physical exercises should be included in the curriculum. 'Swedish' exercises are beneficial, as they consist of games that provide pleasant and active forms of exercise. These activities contribute to the health of young bodies and enhance the grace of girls' movements. This outlines an education that, it seems, would be inadequate to meet the needs of young daughters of India, yet it aims to cultivate them into useful and cultured women, heads of happy households, and 'Lights of the Home'.

There will always be exceptional girls who require, for the proper development of their abilities, a deeper and broader education, and these individuals must be supported according to their personal interests and needs.¹⁵ Such girls may be born in India to revive her, the learned women of the past, and to restore to her the diadem, the long-lost pearl of elevated female intelligence.

Annie Besant asserted that the resurgence of Indian greatness will not occur until Indian girls and women achieve a more expansive, liberated, and fulfilling existence, as the redemption of India largely rests in the hands of its women. The capacity of women to elevate or diminish men is virtually limitless, and both men and women should progress together towards the upliftment of India; otherwise, she will never rise at all.¹⁶ The struggle for girls' education marks the beginning, and may the Good God bless those who are at the forefront and all benevolent forces that seek to enlighten their minds and strengthen their hearts. There is no doubt regarding the increasing awareness in the country concerning female education. Proper education illuminates the inner perfection in within Man.

All forms of knowledge, whether secular or spiritual, reside within the human mind. Therefore, it is imperative that we consistently promote positive ideas, as positive education fosters positive thinking, as noted by Annie Besant. She emphasized the necessity of education, as it shapes character,

enhances mental strength, broadens intellect, and enables individuals to be self-reliant. The main centre of education revolves growth of the mind. To gain a vast knowledge, much concentration is felt needful. Concentration is the sole key to unlocking the treasure trove of knowledge. Thus, the essence of education is the focus of the mind rather than merely the accumulation of facts.

Girl children should receive the same level of support and education as male children.¹⁷ The promotion of female education should be centered around religious principles. The women of India must evolve and flourish following the example set by Sita, who is truly exceptional.

Education transcends the simple training of the mind and the mere acquisition of knowledge; it encompasses the understanding of life's significance in its entirety. She further advocated that the role of education is to cultivate individuals who are both integrated and intelligent.

Annie Besant asserted that education should assist in uncovering enduring values, preventing individuals from merely adhering to formulas or repeating slogans; it should work to dismantle national and social barriers rather than reinforcing them, as these foster antagonism among people.¹⁸ Education ought to facilitate the discovery of genuine values through impartial inquiry and self-awareness. It should stimulate the ability to be self-aware, rather than solely indulging in the pursuit of self-expression.

Annie Besant emphasized that the aim of education is to foster appropriate relationships; not only among individuals but also between the individual and society. This is why it is crucial for education to primarily assist the individual in comprehending his own psychological processes.

While Annie Besant and some of her supporters condemned child marriages for hindering female education, they also questioned the necessity of widow remarriage, advocating instead for education. In her 1903 article titled "Widow Remarriage," Besant expressed her opposition to early marriages.¹⁹ She stated, "What the Indian woman requires is not an education modeled after the Western system, which prepares students for a competitive business environment, but rather an education that is religious, literary, artistic, and practical, equipping her to fulfill the demands of a life where competition is absent and where the principle of duty to those around her prevails." Furthermore, she urged women to contribute to society selflessly in a manner that aligns with what she believed to be Indian tradition.

She emphasized the necessity for girls to receive personalized encouragement to achieve a deeper and broader education, holding an optimistic belief that they would ultimately lead India. Annie Besant's strength was evident in her proposal of a curricular model for schools. She believed that education should be rooted in one's tradition as a fundamental aspect, particularly for girls from all communities, as it would provide them with an ethical foundation and enhance their proficiency in vernacular languages, Sanskrit, and Arabic. Annie Besant possessed a remarkable literary appreciation that allowed her to recognize the value of this area of study.²⁰

During her time at Adyar, the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant established the Olcott Panchama School for underprivileged communities and initiated her campaign for National Education. The Panchama School was originally founded and developed to a certain extent during the era of the founders of the Theosophical Society. While addressing an assembly at Pachiyappa's College in Madras, she advocated for the reform of the Indian Education System.²¹

Annie Besant likened education to a lever that could empower individuals to elevate themselves. She was motivated to pursue educational reforms due to numerous appeals from children belonging to the lower classes, specifically the Pariah Community and other marginalized groups.²² Consequently, Annie Besant resolved to commit herself to the mission of educating the oppressed classes. She asserted that social reformers should elevate the depressed classes to a comparable standard of physical purity, rather than lowering the standards of the clean to match those of the unclean. The Olcott Panchama School established its own standards, where children were instructed to bathe, wear clean clothing, and were provided with nutritious meals.²³ In Annie Besant's view, education is fundamentally about service. She advocated for the necessity of, firstly, a fellowship of faiths; secondly, a unified citizenship; and thirdly, the cultural unity of India.

Education ought to focus on truth, courage, happiness, leisure, service, study, simplicity, and self-control. It should be accessible to everyone, supported by a comprehensive background of human and social experiences that shape a distinct character, largely influenced by what can be termed as general social experience. It is essential that each individual is properly shaped, as they embody a multitude of qualities, capacities, and possibilities. Consequently, 'Education' should primarily be founded on the examination of each individual child, tailored to their unique characteristics.²⁴

According to the perspective of Annie Besant, if Children are surrounded by criticism, they may learn to judge. If Children are exposed to hostility, they might learn to engage in conflict. If Children are raised in fear, they could become apprehensive. If Children experience pity, they may develop a sense of self-pity. If Children are subjected to ridicule, they might become shy. If Children are influenced by jealousy, they could learn to feel envy. If Children are made to feel shame, they may learn to experience guilt. If Children are nurtured in an environment of tolerance, they could develop patience. If Children receive encouragement, they may grow in confidence. If Children are praised, they could learn to appreciate. If Children are given approval, they might learn to value themselves. If Children are accepted, they could discover love in the world. If Children are recognized, they may learn to set goals. If Children are taught to share, they could become generous. If Children are raised with honesty and fairness, they may learn the principles of truth and justice. If Children feel secure, they could develop faith in themselves and those around them. If Children are surrounded by friendliness, they may come to see the world as a pleasant place to inhabit. If Children experience security, they could learn to attain peace of mind.

Annie Besant asserted that education is crucial for every thinker and patriot, as the future of the nation relies on it. No individual who genuinely cares for their country can overlook the issue of national education.²⁵ Under Annie Besant's presidentship, the Theosophical Society advocated for the advancement of national education. She emphasized that for this initiative to succeed, it must be made popular, and its goals and objectives should be communicated to every individual who loves India.

Furthermore, Annie Besant highlighted that genuine education resembles gardening; it involves nurturing good seeds and encouraging them to grow and thrive. She also instilled in children the belief that concentration leads to 'will power,' and to cultivate concentration, one must fully dedicate their mind to meaningful education. Engaging in purposeless activities, engaging in futile disputes, indulging in backbiting, participating in meaningless conversations, daydreaming, worrying about trivial matters, and criticizing others are detrimental and can deplete mental energy.

In her work *'Birth of New India'*, Annie Besant emphasized the importance of 'Education as a National Duty'. She argued that for education to be effective in all areas, it must be undertaken, structured, directed, and implemented by individuals who not only love their country but also comprehend its needs and are knowledgeable about its unique traits, characteristics, and traditions. For education to be genuinely beneficial it should be based on an understanding of the country's history as well as its current state; it should be crafted in line with ancient traditions and national customs, while also being adapted to modern requirements, addressing the evolving demands of a growing nation.²⁶ She advocated for the development of both men and women in India, highlighting the necessity for individuals with extensive knowledge of the country on one hand, and educational specialists on the other. A comprehensive understanding of education can only be achieved by studying national life, recognizing the needs of various societal classes, and exploring how those needs can be addressed, as well as by examining political and social issues; these insights are crucial for the effective formulation of educational policies.²⁷

During her tenure as President in the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant advocated that the youth of India, both boys and girls, are the architects of the nation's future. She referenced prominent figures such as Gladstone and Lord Salisbury, highlighting their dedication to the education of the young. In addition to moral and physical education, she emphasized the necessity of intellectual education, so that India may achieve its true potential as a nation with all aspects of national life fully realized.

Annie Besant took the initiative to establish primary and secondary schools, along with colleges in various locations. Among these were the Boys' School, Girls' School, and Colleges in Banaras, as well as the college and school in Madanapalle²⁸, Adyar, and the Girls' School in Mylapore, Madras. The aforementioned educational institutions are operated by the Theosophical Educational Trust. These schools and colleges were dedicated to the advancement of National Education during that period.²⁹ The educational efforts within the Theosophical Society were initiated by its founders and leaders. A Theosophical Sanskrit school was established in Mylapore in 1883, followed by another Sanskrit school in Triplicane. The Theosophical lodges across the nation began to open schools on their premises. Vedic *Patshalas* were initiated in the Theosophical branches to revive Sanskrit. A Sanskrit class was organized under the auspices of the Kumbakonam branch of the Theosophical Society. In Guntur, Calcutta, Naldanga, Moradabad, Nellore, Gorakhpore, and Gooty, the Society established Sanskrit and other schools. In Lucknow, the local branch raised a popular subscription of Rs. 7000 to open a Sanskrit college.³⁰

To conclude, in 1893, when Annie Besant joined the Indian Theosophical Movement, significant advancements were observed in the educational landscape of India in general and Tamil region in particular. The Society had founded numerous girls' and boys' schools in various regions of India, and the Theosophical Trust encompassed a college and approximately twenty schools. The educational endeavours of Theosophists in India in general and Annie Besant in Tamil regions for spreading education among the young girls was remarkable. . Even today, members of the Theosophical Society continue to operate a number of schools for girls. Besant strongly believed that education is the panacea for the ills connected with the merging girls and on the attainment increasing literacy among the girls would certainly lead to the to the pathway of their emancipation.

End Notes

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