

## Role of Annie Besant in Women's Indian Association (WIA) – A Study

Dr. A. Prabhakaran

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of History, Thiru Kolanjiappar Government Arts College, Virudhachalam (India)

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 10 June 2019

#### Keywords

Women's India Association, Home Rule Movement, Annie Besant.

#### Corresponding Author

Email: prabhahist17[at]gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

The Women's Indian Association (WIA) was founded at Adayar, Madras, in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margret Cousins, Jeena Raja Dasa, and others to liberate women from the deplorable condition women suffered in socio-economic and political matters during the 19th and the early 20th century. The Association later developed into a potent force to fight against illiteracy, child marriage, the Devadasi system and other, social ills. Annie Besant was born on 1 October 1847 in London. This article accounts the role of Annie Besant in Women's Indian Association (WIA).

### 1. Introduction

Annie Besant, the daughter of William page wood, was born on 1 October 1847 in London. In 1852, when she was five years old, her father died. And hence the family faced great difficulties. So she had to leave home at the age of 13 in 1861. She came to stay with Maryat in Paris who was stern and religious. Besant apart from spending time in religious activities also found pleasure in reading the works of Plato, Dante and Iliad. The two main tragedies of her early life were her rejection of Christianity and her marriage. In 1867, she was married to Frank Besant, a Clergyman, but the marriage proved to be failure and she had to seek a divorce. As a result she had to come out of the world. This gave her the opportunity to gain experience in several professions, which she had to adopt in order to maintain her live hood. She worked as a cook, a nurse and did needle work to support herself.<sup>1</sup> In the year 1874 Besant worked under Charless Bradhlaugh who was a national reformer.



Figure 1: Photography of Annie Besant

In 1881, She became his co-editor. Besant made her first speech at the co-operative institute, Castle street at London, where is she demanded political status for women and equality in all spheres on the ground that if they were inferior, they would not be able to with stand open competition. She joined the theosophical society and the influence of Madam Blavatsky. In 1892, madam Blavatsky died and Besant along with W.O Judge became the joint head so the confide liable section of the society.<sup>2</sup> The entry of Annie Besant into Indian

Politics in the year 1914 galvanized new and increased national consciousness in both men and women.

In October 1913, she spoke at a great public meeting in madras recommending that there should be a standing committee of the house of commons for Indian attains, Which would go into the question of how India might attain freedom.<sup>3</sup> When she was in London, She tried to form an Indian party in the parliament but her effort ended in failure. However, her propaganda in England in favour of granting self government to Indian prepared the ground towards the formation of "Home Rule league" in London.<sup>4</sup> Annie Besant took up the work in helping the Indian people to get self-knowledge, self-respect and self- government.<sup>5</sup> On her return to India, in the year 1914, She came through a weekly newspaper named "common weal", which helped her political work, which namely focused on the public and their problem.<sup>6</sup>

In 1914, she purchased the "Madras Standard" for her political work and renamed it as "New India". Margaret cousins was the subeditor of new India. She called this freedom "Home Rule" for India.<sup>7</sup> Besant was the registered printer and publisher of the daily English new India and registered printer of a weekly Journal called the "Commonweal".<sup>8</sup> Annie Besant was a member of the Indian national congress in 1914. Her first relief was that India should have her freedom but also remain in the British common wealth.<sup>9</sup> To get support of the Indian National Congress for the proposed Home Rule League; Annie Besant went to Bombay in December 1915, Where the congress was to hold in annual session. While in Bombay, she met the grand old man of India, Dadabai Nauroji, who spoke encouragingly about the proposed Home Rule League.<sup>10</sup>

### 2. Home Rule Movement

In Home Rule Movement of Besant was supported by eminent personalities like B.G.Tilak, Dedabhai Naroji, S.Subramanya ayyar, B.P Wradhia and Karnath. The press in madras presidency played a vital role in propagating the ideals of the movement among the masses, the first time the seeds of nationalism in the presidency and were sown for creating political consciousness among the people of India.<sup>11</sup> Madras presidency became the centre of Home Rule agitation and thrust is to the forefront of all Indian polities.<sup>12</sup> Annie Besant

Joined the congress and she brought new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organization thereby a new outlook into the field of congress. Annie Besant disassociated herself with all the reforms for which the congress stood, save on the self government and she worked continuously in press and platform for that criteria.<sup>13</sup> Annie Besant was very active in bringing to together different political parties and leaders for framing an agreed scheme of Swaraj and creating the opinion end to end through press and platforms. Besant sowed the seeds of self- government in the heart of every Indian.<sup>14</sup>

Annie Besant was a woman of extraordinary learning not only in religion but also in politics. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century several women's organizations were started by the European women to fight for native women's rights. The autonomous women organizations such as the Women's India Association and All India Women's Conference played an active role from 1917, onwards in taking up several women issues the main objectives of these organizations were to work for the upliftment of women. The Women's Indian Association established in 1917, was one among them to work for the political rights of women.<sup>15</sup> The three major women's organizations, which organized between 1917 and 1927, were

- Women's Indian 1917 and 1927, were council of women in Indian Association (New1)
- The national council of women in Indian Association (NEW1)
- All India Women's Conference (AWC).<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Women's Indian Association

The main objective of these organizations was to work for the uplift of women. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the strength in number began to increase. The Women's Indian Association was one among them to work for the political rights of women.<sup>17</sup> In 1917 the Women's Indian Association was founded by two European women Theosophists Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Fima Raja Desa in Madras under the leadership of Annie Besant. Women's Indian Association was the first association, which brought all India women together for mutual assistance. The branches of the Women's Indian Association spread from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. By 1923-1924 it had lifted four branches and 2500 members and by 1926-1927 there were many branches and 4000 members.<sup>18</sup>

The main aim of the Women's Indian Association was to get their suffrage in the local administration, central and state legislatures and got into it.<sup>19</sup> The other objectives of the Women's India Association were to present to women their responsibility as daughters of India to help them realize that the future of India lies in their responsibility as daughter of India to help them realize that the future of India lies in their hands since being housewives and mothers they play an important role in the family in training and guiding and forming their child who will rule India in future.<sup>20</sup> To encourage and arouse women in to groups for the purpose of self – government and education, and for definite service of other

- to secure for every girl and boy the right of education through schemes of compulsory primary education, including the teaching of religion.

- to secure the abolition of child married girls to sixteen.
- to secure women the right to vote in municipal and legislative councils on the same terms as it in or may be granted to men and
- to secure for women the right to be elected as members of all municipal and legislative councils.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2: Annie Besant with Women's Indian Association members

The Women's Indian Association published its monthly journals in English named "Stri. Dharma". Articles in Hindi and Telugu, Tamil were also included in Stri. Dharma. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy worked as the editor of this Journal from 1931 to 1940. It earned the news of events which was of interest to women, reports from various other branches and articles on Women's Education.<sup>22</sup> The Indian women's movement was the chief force behind the struggle for women franchise. The first campaign for women's franchise as started in the year 1917. Three women without much talent and personality if which two were foreigners' and one was an Indian had a deep impression in their mind to bring forth the Indian women's and make them to participate in the freedom struggle. They were Anne Besant, Margaret Cousins and Sarojini Naidu.<sup>23</sup> Margaret Cousins's, wife of the Irish theosophist and poet and her husband James H. Cousins came to India with the inspiration of Annie Besant.<sup>24</sup>

Women's Associations contributions towards the working of the suppression of immoral traffic in women and children act, and also the disabilities of the Devadasi System in Hindu temples in the Madras presidency gained great appreciation, Women's Indian Association was strongly in favour of Muthulakshmi resolution and bill to be prohibit the continuity of the Devadasi system and to secure economic victims. Devadasi abolition Bill received spontaneous support from all sections of the people. It consistently worked for the eradication of untouchability both by the propaganda meeting in the city and by giving grants and scholarships to institutions and individuals for the education of girls belonging to Adi Dravida community.<sup>25</sup> All India women's conference (AIWC) was started by Women's Indian Association in 1927, as a forum to take up the problems of women's education and to recommend policies to the government. Later on the forum was consolidated as a women's organization with constitution framed in 1929. Initially it had only eight branches, twenty four centres and 400 members all over India. The primary objective of All India women's conference was to promote education for both sexes at all levels and also to deal with problems related to the welfare of women and children.<sup>26</sup> The Third All India

conference was held at Patna in 1929 with the Dowager Rani of Mirdha as president. The third All India Women's conference on educational reform met at Patna from 3 to 7 January 1929, amidst a last gathering of men and women including a large number of delegates who had come from all parts of India.<sup>27</sup> The conference urged the government, municipal councils, local bodies, and women Association to organize classes and centre to educate adult women in domestic science, time arts, literary industrial and general subjects including girl guiding.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The constituent Assembly set up in the year October 1946, and a body elected by the existing legislatures, had among its members Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Renuka Roy and Hansa Mehta among others to frame the constitution of independent India. Thus the seed sown by Annie Besant during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### References

1. Man Mohan Kaur, women in Indians Freedom Struggle, New Delhi, 1985, P.112
2. Ibid; P.113
3. S.P.Sen, Dictionary of National Biography FVOI.1(A.D), Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1972, P.153
4. G.venkatesan, history of freedom struggle in India, Madurai, 1933, P.154.
5. Bagwan Dass, ANnie Besant and Clanging world adyar panpheleti Nos. 190-191, Oct –Nov. 1934. Adyar, madras, 19324 P.29.
6. Rajakuamr, Annie Beasant rise to power Indian Politics 1914-1947, New Delhi- 1981, P.75
7. S.P. Sen, Op –Cit, P.153
8. Tamil Nadu archives, history of freedom movement nunded no.64, Home Rule Movement, 1914-1920. P.27
9. Kanji Dwerakadas, India's first for freedom 1913-1937, Bombay, 1966, P.20
10. S. Gopalakrishnan, Political Movements in south India 1914-1928, Madras, 1981, P.40.
11. Acting Chief secretary to the government of madras, letter to the secretary to the government of India. 1<sup>st</sup> January 1917.
12. C.J. Backer. the Politics of south India. 1920 – 1937, New Delhi 1979. P.1
13. Man Mohan Kaur, Women in Indian Freedom struggle, New Delhi 1985, PP 117. 121.
14. NNPR, Bharathi, Madras, dated 7-7-1916. P.1194.
15. P.M. Mathew and M.S. Nair, organisation and women's interest, new Delhi, 1986 P.11
16. Vimitha coul, Women and the wind change, New Delhi, 2000, P. 23
17. Women's Indian Associations, Report of golden Jubbe Celebration 1917-1967, Thiruvannamiyur, Madras, P-1.
18. P.R. Reddy and samngala, Women in Development. Vol.1, 1998, P. 953
19. Shri – Dharma, Vol – 16, No.11, January, Women's Indian Association Madras, 1918. P - 11.
20. Tamil Arasu, 1984, Vol XIV, No.8, February, Government of Tamil Nadu, 19841 P – 15.
21. Stri. Dharma, Vol.4, No.1 , Women's Indian Association madras, 1918, P- 2.
22. Women Indian Association Report for the year 1927, Madras, P- 9.
23. Government of Tamil Nadu, Tamil Arasu, 1984, Vol.Xiv. No.8, Felaranazy Madras, 1984, P.15
24. M. Muthannai Mother Besant and Mahathma Ghandhi, Tamil Nadu, Madras, 1986, P.191
25. Government of Madras, G.O. No.4079, Law (general) department dated 20-12-1927.
26. Tamil Archives, All India women's conference papers File No.1, 1927, pp.13-14. Swadesa mitran.
27. Report of the third All India Women's conferences on educational reforms 3 to 7 January 1929, Patna, P-9.
28. Ibid. pp.69-72.