

## Introduction to *Annie Besant in India*

In July 1924, at the Queen's Hall in London, the Golden Jubilee of Annie Besant's public work was celebrated. C. Jinarājadāsa, who was at the time in Adyar, Madras, India, quoted from a telegram he received concerning the occasion which said: 'I am amazed... this is no narrow Jubilee; it is the history of the past fifty years.' A number of her former colleagues were there, including the MP George Lansbury.

From the Irish struggle to Home Rule for India, from fiercely fighting social injustice and inequality in England to tackling child marriage in India, from exposing the hypocrisy of the upper classes in London towards the appalling poverty of its East End, from becoming Madame Blavatsky's successor (according to Blavatsky's own words) to being elected President of the Theosophical Society (TS) and an open target for malice and unending misrepresentation, even to this day, Annie Besant made history.

Most public figures retain a form of protective shield, even in these days of electronic media. Annie Besant's public work was direct, open, uncompromising, relentless and effective. Her protective shield, if there was one, was a sound, calm and life-altering unselfishness. As a deep student of the *Bhagavad Gitā*, she knew that only selfless action can transform the mind and therefore the world. She was, indeed, the 'sage of stable mind' described by Sri Krishna to Arjuna in chapter two of that pearl of world spirituality:

He whose mind is free from anxiety amid pains, indifferent amid pleasures, loosed from passion, fear and anger, he is called a sage of stable mind. (56)

He who on every side is without attachments, whatever hap of fair and foul, who neither likes nor dislikes, of such a one the understanding is well-poised. (57)

Her *Autobiography*, published in 1893, narrates her personal journey as it happened and provides compelling evidence that unselfishness and a profound sense of justice were the driving forces of her life, much before she joined the Theosophical Society. She was portrayed during the serious institutional crises in the TS, in a similar way as in the Judge and the Leadbeater cases, as a power-hungry, deluded, ambitious and weak woman. Her accusers had a psychological need to thus portray her as such, for at every step she was making her own decisions without fear or favour. However, life shows that smearing a leader that does not work for self eventually backfires.

As an example, two scholars in our century (Daniel H. Caldwell<sup>1</sup> and David Reigle<sup>2</sup>) presented unbiased, technical and scholarly evidence that the Third Volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, published by Annie Besant in 1897, with the notes which were left behind by Madame Blavatsky in her care, was indeed the work of the author of *The Secret Doctrine* and not an adulterated text. For publishing it she endured widespread abuse and malice from Theosophical groups in different parts of the world, not affiliated with the International Headquarters at Adyar. The abuse continued in the twentieth century through books, magazines, journals, blogs and websites, and it continues even today.

As President of the Theosophical Society she spearheaded an unprecedented popularization of Theosophy. Her books became widely popular, bringing the message of Theosophy to remote corners of the globe. The TS expanded its presence to countries in which it did not exist before. She helped in making the light of Theosophy shine far and wide.

She introduced to the world a young, shy, sometimes vacant-looking young boy called Jiddu Krishnamurti. She was completely convinced that one day he would become the vehicle for the Bodhisattva Maitreya, the World Teacher. Again she was ridiculed and abused, even by some of her own TS members. But if you read Krishnamurti's final statement of February 1986, recorded a few days before he died, and included in Chapter Five, you will see how her vision for him was completely fulfilled. Those who knew him closely reported on the depth of his love for 'Amma', as Krishnaji referred to Dr Besant.

But it was her work for Mother India that occupied a great deal of her time, to which she lent a mind and a heart galvanized by the ever-present holiness which dwells in Āryavārta, the ancient name for India. An essential part of this book consists of the many and moving testimonies of her Indian colleagues and contemporaries about how complete, self-denying and compassionate was her dedication to India, and equally her courage and determination while working for that nation. The testimonies reveal how her life and love for the country was poured through the hearts and minds of her colleagues and co-workers. She was venerated almost like a spiritual political guru, with the fundamental difference that while many 'political gurus' use the adulation to pursue their own self-interest, Dr Besant channelled the veneration towards her into a mass movement that was instrumental in awakening India from its slumber.

The real core of this book is her vision for India. Essential to that vision is the principle that the state does not exist for itself but must wisely use its powers and resources to awaken the potentialities of every individual, to bring opportunities to all, to educate its citizens in the truth that all life is one. In Dr Besant's vision, the essence of religion – which the Indian ethos calls *dharma*, duty, law, order, essential nature – can provide the living background to the education and growth of individuals. This comes about not by inculcating beliefs and dogmas, but by sharing the view that we do not exist for ourselves alone. The significance of our lives is achieved when we realize that we have a duty to society, and that duty is service. For Dr Besant, that duty was spiritually compelling: "Life must be a life of service. Unless we are serving, we have no right to live. We live by the constant sacrifice of other lives on every side, and we must pay it back; otherwise, to use an ancient phrase, we are but thieves and do not repay the gift." (*The Theosophist*, March 1909)

When she publicly differed from M.K. Gandhi in his policies of civil disobedience and non-cooperation, and was practically shunted aside by the leadership of the freedom movement, she would still press on with her work. She continued to maintain that India one day would be a spiritual democracy. In his book, *A Theosophist Looks at the World*, N. Sri Ram (TPH Adyar, 1950), who was at one time Dr Besant's private secretary, describes the concept:

A spiritual democracy can only mean for us a democracy in which there is the preference of Wisdom to ignorance; order brought by elimination of those conflicts which now tear the democratic body; freedom for each to grow to his possible stature; a democracy in which all laws and institutions in every department will exist to afford an outlet to the creative energies of the people and make an appeal by their rightness to the good sense and idealism in every uncorrupted individual. It must be a democracy planned and constructed with proper measures and in due proportion, showing a perfect adaptation of its various parts to each other and to the whole.

This book contains three Appendices: 'A Besant Diary of Principal Events', 'A List of Books and Pamphlets Written by Annie Besant' and 'Annie Besant and the Judge Case'. The first two were selected by Dr Agarwal and the third one by me. Since so many books, articles and essays have been written for more than one hundred and twenty years condemning Dr Besant for her role in the Judge Case it seems only appropriate to present her views of that difficult period in the life of the Theosophical Society, together with those of Col. Henry S. Olcott and some of his fellow workers in the TS.

## Acknowledgements

Radha Burnier, President of the Theosophical Society (1980-2013) mentioned to me and to others at Adyar that, before he passed away, J. Krishnamurti asked her to write a biography of 'Amma' (as he used to refer to Annie Besant). While keeping the idea in her mind she was constantly hampered by lack of time due to her heavy responsibilities, including many international travels. Mrs Burnier then asked Dr C. V. Agarwal, former General Secretary of the Theosophical Society in India and the author of the book *The Buddhist and Theosophical Movements*, which depicted the unparalleled contribution of Col. H. S. Olcott to the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, to come to Adyar.

Dr Agarwal took up residence at Adyar, the International Headquarters of the TS in Chennai, India, and conducted research on the book for a number of years, until he passed away in June 2009. He was also at that time Officer-in-Charge of the TS Archives.

Mrs Burnier realised that it was not possible to undertake a full biography of Dr Besant. Instead, she said that the book should concentrate on her work in India. She also decided that the first chapter should consist of a condensed version of Annie Besant's *Autobiography*, which was duly prepared by Dr Agarwal.

After Dr Agarwal passed away, I went to Mrs Burnier's office and indicated to her that with notes and material prepared by him I could try and produce a manuscript for her consideration, to which she agreed. After I left Adyar, in September 2011, I worked on the manuscript in my spare time. A triennial meeting of the Indo-Pacific Federation of the TS was scheduled to take place in Bali, Indonesia, at the end of October 2013. I had planned to attend that meeting and then proceed to Adyar in order to conduct a course at The School of the Wisdom. I was also going to show the unfinished manuscript to Radhaji.

On the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013, when my wife Linda and I were at breakfast, John Vorstermans, National President of the New Zealand Section of the TS, told us the news that

Radhaji had passed away on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> October at her residence at Adyar. The news travelled very fast throughout the TS. Tributes to her came from different parts of the world. After I arrived at Adyar I went up to Parsi Quarters, her residence, now empty, to pay my respects to her. She had helped me to dedicate myself to the work of the Society.

Before I left Adyar, in September 2011, Radhaji had approved the table of contents and chose the title for the book, *Annie Besant in India*. We had several telephone conversations between the end of 2011 and her passing in 2013. Working full time and with a schedule of travels within Australia and sometimes also overseas, my time allocated to work on the book was limited until more recent times.

Sincere thanks are due to Mrs Radha Burnier for her encouragement, guidance and inspiration, as well as for conversations over a period of more than seven years about the history of the TS and the role of Adyar, about Dr Besant and also Krishnaji. [I would also eventually ask her some Sanskrit questions, like the meaning of the word *stitha* (in *stithaprajña*, the stable mind of the sage mentioned in the Second Discourse in the *Bhagavad Gītā*). She said: ‘Immovable’. In other words, a mind unshaken by experiences, steady, firm, unassailable. That was her mind. My respect for her is renewed every day, both in my mind and in my heart.]

This book would not have seen the light of day without the steady and dedicated research work of Dr C. V. Agarwal. He produced most of the content for the first four chapters: ‘An Enduring Dedication (1847-1891)’ – a much condensed version of important points in Mrs Besant’s *Autobiography*; ‘From England to India’, containing Basil Hodgson-Smith’s serialized articles in *The Theosophist* about Mrs Besant’s work from 1891 to 1911, entitled ‘Twenty Years of Work’; ‘*Sanātana Dharma*: Education through Timeless Values’ and ‘President of the Theosophical Society: “Theosophy is for All”’. The first two appendices are also the fruit of his research: ‘A Besant Diary of Principal Events’ and ‘A List of Books and Pamphlets Written by Annie Besant’, both originally published in *The Theosophist*, October 1947, Besant Centenary Number.

Sincere thanks are also due to the Adyar Library and Research Centre at the International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Chennai, India. It was there that Dr Agarwal conducted most of his research for this book over a number of years. Gratitude is also expressed to the TS Archives at Adyar for the photographs included in this book. Appreciation is also extended to the Campbell Theosophical Research Library in Sydney which contains a unique collection of Theosophical periodicals from the earliest years of the TS.

I am grateful for the help given by Sri S. Sundaram, former General Secretary of the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society, and resident at its Headquarters, for providing information about Dr Bhagavan Das and Dr Besant, in particular his moving testimony after the former had immersed her ashes in the Ganga. Srimati Manju Sundaram, Visiting Professor of the Benares Hindu University, provided much needed information on the Indian pandits that helped Mrs Besant with her translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* into English.

Special thanks are due to Neeta Agrawal, an accomplished designer, for her unique cover design and blurb, and also for her generous assistance over a long period of time. She has undertaken voluntary work for the Theosophical Publishing House at Adyar for many years thus enhancing, with her artistic acumen, the quality of books and magazines that TPH Adyar brings out. Her work can be seen on Instagram under ‘neetadesign’.

It is hoped that an Indian edition of this book may be published in the not too distant future.

Pedro Oliveira  
*Compiler*

## References

1. *The Myth of the “Missing” Third Volume of The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky Archives, <https://www.blavatskyarchives.com/sdiiipt1.htm>
2. *Secret Doctrine Würzburg Manuscript* by David Reigle, Eastern School Press, Cotopaxi, Colorado, 2014.