

Book Review: *Annie Besant in India*, compiled by C. V. Agarwal and Pedro Oliveira. Olive Tree Publishing, Australia, 2021, 590 pp., AUD\$40.00.

To read *Annie Besant in India* is to share something of the extraordinary journey of discovery that Dr Agarwal and Pedro Oliveira as compilers have been on, traversing the mountains and valleys of both her public and her private life. It is well known that Annie Besant distinguished herself as a speaker, writer, and agitator for social justice both in Ireland and England. Her unstinting work for self-rule in India has also earned her a place in the history annals and in 2015 an image even appeared on Google India celebrating her 168th birth anniversary. It is perhaps less understood, however, why she chose a life working for The Theosophical Society rather than simply maintaining her position in the political sphere. What is unique about this publication therefore is that it serves as an invaluable record of her deepest spiritual aspirations for humanity as a whole and for India in particular.

The quote in the Preface from a telegram received by then Vice-President of the Theosophical Society, C. Jinarajadasa, during a Golden Jubilee celebration of Annie Besant's public work, is beautifully apposite, and the assertion that 'Annie Besant made history' is proven time and again throughout the book. Moreover, the way in which her ideals are fundamental to the story of her life is well demonstrated. In its entirety, this biography goes a long way to understand her commitment to help those who suffer, her ability to persevere in the face of difficulty, especially personal attack, and to fearlessly challenge the status quo when the welfare of others was at stake. Such moral courage clearly stood her in good stead during the turbulent years within the Society itself and the division that followed. A strong defense of Annie Besant from the outset is upheld by rigorous and extensive research; readers may weigh the evidence for themselves.

It is interesting to note that the writing of this biography has its own history and could be considered a story within a story. It owed its beginnings to J. Krishnamurti when he asked past President of the Theosophical Society Radha Burnier to write a biography of 'Amma.' As Mrs. Burnier was constantly hampered by lack of time, Dr. C.V. Agarwal was asked to conduct the research. The compilation of the first four chapters, which include Annie Besant's formative years before arriving in India, is therefore largely attributed to him. When Dr. Agarwal passed away in 2009, Pedro Oliveira of the Theosophical Society in Australia was 'handed the baton' and we have this author to thank for the final publication of the book. The title *Annie Besant in India* was chosen by Radha Burnier before her passing in 2013. This was not only for pragmatic reasons, as an entire biography would have been unwieldy, but also to acknowledge Annie Besant's outstanding work for 'Mother India.'

Each Chapter is well titled, and most are prefaced by an ordered timeline of significant activities and achievements. Additionally, an overall summary 'A Besant Diary of Principal Events' is provided in Appendix 1 of the book. In the opening of the first Chapter, 'An Enduring Dedication' the historical context of her birth in London in 1847, highlighting the attitudes and moral issues of the times, is well-drawn. Some insight is also afforded into what was happening in India during the period known as the British Raj. Most pertinent to the theme of the book, however, is the early summation of her character. Hers was a 'kind, intelligent and compassionate nature' which responded to the troubles of those around her

with ‘energy, determination, and selflessness.’ All this despite difficult family circumstances, an ill-suited marriage which resulted in the loss of custody of her children, and intense opposition to her work for the poor and oppressed.

Much of this Chapter is derived from Annie Besant’s own autobiography, which covers her personal journey until 1891. For those interested in reading this book as well, the full reference for *An Autobiography* is provided in the notes. Mrs Besant joined the Theosophical Society in 1889 after having reviewed ‘The Secret Doctrine’ and ended some 17 years of selfless political activity two years later. There is a very touching description of her meeting with Helena Petrovna Blavatsky for the first time. Her journey from Christianity to atheism, and from secular, social reformism to Theosophy, was one of upheaval and struggle. Yet she had no doubt that in finding Theosophy her ‘weary search’ was over and that ‘it is better to live in a universe you are beginning to understand than one which is full of problems never to be solved.’

The compiler notes that Annie Besant began speaking and writing for the Society soon after joining. The approaching death of HPB brought about the need for a successor and Mrs Besant was instructed by her to tour America as her ‘agent and representative.’ Further tours included England, India, Australia, and New Zealand and these are closely recounted in Chapter 2. That it was also a time of a devastating internal crisis which resulted in secession is also addressed, and the controversy is presented in more detail in Appendix 3. Through it all, the records show that her commitment to the Society endured. She writes of that time, ‘since I joined the Society in 1889, I have never had a moment’s regret for having entered it’.

Lecturing and writing was often undertaken along with a relentless touring schedule, and indeed it was to become a feature of her work for the Theosophical Society until she passed away in 1933. A list of publications by Annie Besant is given in Appendix 2, which, if ‘not exhaustive’, shows nothing less than an astonishing literary output. Regarding public talks, Colonel Olcott wrote admiringly of the enormous impact of her lectures everywhere and describes her speeches in India as the ‘most splendid series of discourses’ he had ever listened to. Educational and social reform in India were for Annie Besant the natural extension of her work for the Theosophical Society and the Central Hindu College in Benares was formed accordingly in 1901. This is the segue into Chapter 3 ‘Education through Timeless Values’.

Archives from a wide variety of sources show the unique approach to Indian Education that Annie Besant upheld. She recognized that there was a need for Indian youth to be educated not just intellectually, as in the English tradition, but morally as well. Materialistic western education had become predominant, and the effect was to turn Indians away from their own spiritual heritage. Far from being divisive, however, she sought to draw India and England together, and envisaged a system of education where religious training and ‘universal learning’ were of equal weight. A tolerance of and appreciation for other creeds and faiths was also central to the Hindu revival she espoused, and at the same time she re-awakened Indians to the spiritual truths embedded in Hindu scriptures and to the inner significance of the rituals.

These views were clearly leavened by the altruistic ideal of Universal Brotherhood on which the Theosophical Society was founded, and which continues to be at the heart of the Society

today, along with its practical counterpart, Service. Once the CHC was established she was able to garnish support for a Hindu school for girls and then ultimately a national university. Yet although her work was supported at the highest levels, including by the Maharaja of Benares and the Viceroy of India, The Earl of Minto, opposition grew. The story is meticulously documented and once again Mrs Besant was to resolutely continue in whatever capacity she could. The Hindu University recognized her labours in the educational field by conferring on her of a Degree of Doctor of Letters in 1921. Chapter 3 concludes with a comprehensive list of the educational institutions founded or inspired by her and other Theosophists.

In 1907 Annie Besant was elected President of the Theosophical Society and her hopes are summed up succinctly in the title of Chapter 4 'President of the Theosophical Society: Theosophy is for All'. An outstanding contribution to the Society was made by speaking and writing in more accessible ways and thus spreading Theosophy far and wide. Many noteworthy events are covered in this chapter, some further exemplifying the extent of internal troubles she had to endure. This is balanced by numerous lasting achievements especially and including the establishment of the Theosophical Publishing House at Adyar. The Theosophical Society Order of Service, begun in 1908 and later renamed the Theosophical Order of Service also continues to this day. A series of moving and informative letters written for the Golden Jubilee celebrating 50th years of her public life, is a highlight.

In Chapter 5. 'Krishnaji and the World Teacher Movement' archival references concerning the coming of a great religious teacher provide the background to Krishnamurti's adoption and upbringing at Adyar. Mrs Besant's declaration that Krishnamurti would be a vehicle for the World Teacher had its detractors within the Society and eventually led to the secession of the German Section. Yet her insight would eventually prove justified. Through his remarkable speeches and writing, Krishnamurti began to attract many followers, even to the extent that an unwelcome spiritual authority grew around him and he felt compelled to dissolve the Order of the Star. Through it all, his devotion to 'Amma' never wavered.

One of the strengths of *Annie Besant in India* is the way in which the compilers allow the voice of their subject to shine freely. The next four chapters are derived solely from her book *India - Bond or Free? – A World Problem*. Chapter 6, 'Her Vision for India: The Means of India's Regeneration' is from a lecture she delivered in 1895, two years after her arrival in India. In his tribute to Annie Besant, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru notes that 'between her thought and her action there is very little distance.' This is exemplified in the proposal laid out here, as much of which she envisaged came to pass in one form or another. The need for a spiritual revival before a material one is reinvigorated in Chapter 7 'India's Awakening'. It consists of a lecture given in 1910 in which she advocates for unselfishness and wisdom to be at the root of action and for 'a nucleus of wise and steady thinkers in order that popular movement may find its way aright.'

Annie Besant's crowning glory in the political sense may be said to be her dedicated work towards Swarāj or Self-Rule and in Chapter 8 'Home Rule for India' the nuances of this struggle are once more apparent. In an excerpt from her book, she acknowledges her co-workers for constitutional reform and reiterates the importance of being law-abiding. She records a 'whirlwind' of orderly and constructive support during her internment, and which resulted in her peaceful liberation. Mrs Besant was elected President of the National Congress

in 1917 but her hopes for a steady and peaceful road to change were not realized at this time, and the chapter closes with an essay poignantly entitled 'The Breaking up of a United India'.

Undaunted, in 1913 Mrs Besant and a small band of Theosophical workers committed themselves once more to the 'steady advance' of religious, educational, and social reform. Chapter 9 'Commonwealth of India Bill: A Foundation for the Future' is drawn from the Appendix to her book. In it she recounts how this grew to the practical framing of a 'Constitution for India by Indians' and thus her singleness of purpose and organizing talent would come to fruition once more. In 1933, when she was in her 85th year Annie Besant departed from this world. In the final Chapter, tributary letters describe the many facets of her character that shone as one great 'Diamond Soul.' They show that she was as tender as she was forthright, and as compassionate as she was steadfast in her goals. Above all she gave herself absolutely to the helping of humanity. In her own words, having glimpsed the 'glory and the beauty of the Life that knows no difference and recognizes no separation' she could do no other.

Early in the book, in a quote selected from the preface to her autobiography, we find what is to all intents and purposes Annie Besant's apology for writing about herself. It seems, to her credit, that she would have none of the self-centeredness that might accompany such an exercise. These are noble sentiments indeed, but it may also be said that the sympathetic biographer has no such restraints. C.V. Agarwal and Pedro Oliveira champion their subject unhesitatingly, presenting not only the facts of her life and work but also those innermost qualities which enabled her to become a shaper of history, rather than merely a spectator in it. Hers was a life so full of spiritual vitality and accomplishment that doing Annie Besant justice is no small task, as the length and breadth of the book attests. A 'bird's eye view' it may be, but a thorough one, and we thank the compilers for it.

Michelle Osborne

Michelle Osborne joined the Theosophical Society in 1978 and is a long standing member of HPB Lodge, Auckland, New Zealand. She has BA (Hons) Anthropology, an MA(hons) Art and Design and a Diploma of Museum Studies (Dist).