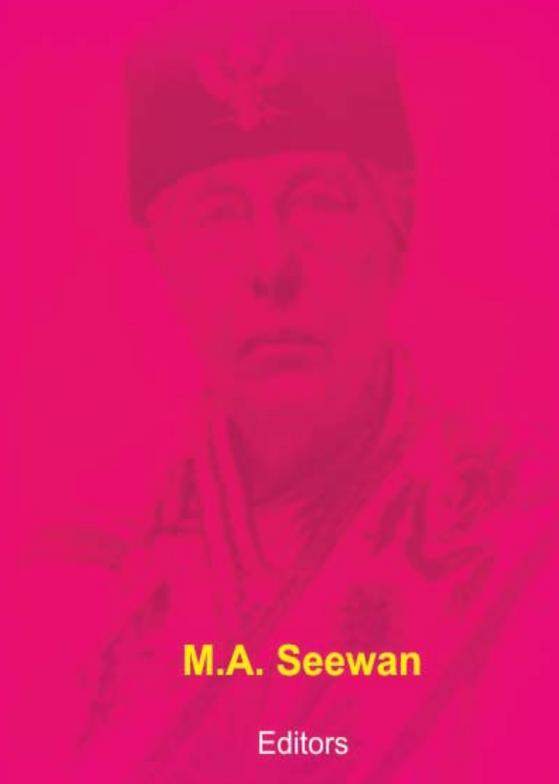


ANNIE BESANT



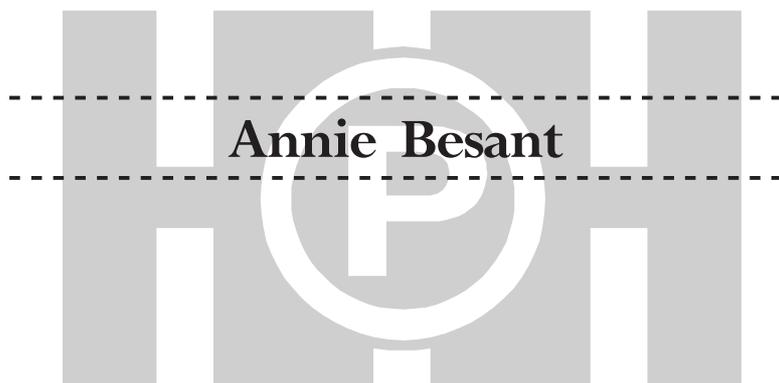
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Annie Besant

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1. An Illustrious Life	1
Introduction • Birth and Childhood • Growth and Education • Marital Bond and Separation • Service in India • Theosophical Society • A Decisive Turn • Establishment of College • New Phase • Home Rule Movement • Congress President • Mahatma Gandhi on the Scene • Spiritual Power • Last Journey • The Descendants	
2. Many Faceted Personality	15
Staunch Socialist • The Unionist • Great Liberal Thinker • Supporter of Irish Home Rule • Supporter of Freemasonry • A Theosophist • A Marxist	
3. Significant Writings [Specimens of Masterpieces]	23
India and England • England and India • India and the Future • Memories of the Past • Great Britain and the War • Destinies of Nations • India's Age-old Glories • The India, I Know • Manu — India's Law-giver • Foundation of the State • Self-governing India • Democracy in India • India's Glorious Cultural Traditions • Aryan Type Conduct • India the	

Imperishable • A Tomorrow of Unrivalled Glory
• To Arouse the Indian Will • At this Vital Moment
• Roots of India's National Movement • On Liberty
• Who is a Patriot? • A Message to India • A Message
to Britain • Trust Us • India and Britain • Free Indians
alone can Defend India • From Mountain Peaks —
a Vision • Key is in India • Work before Us • Statecraft
• Lesson in Statecraft • Home Rule Involves a Home
to Rule • What Does India Want? • Fundamental
Civic Rights and Duties • Evolution of an Indian
Self-government • Preparing the Foundations • What
is a Nation? • Our Ideal of Empire • A World Citizen
• Aristocratic Socialism • Aristocratic Democracy
• To Students: India's Good must Come First!
• Industry and Economics • Wanted a Radical
Programme • On Taxation • On Land Ownership
• Ancient Method of Famine Alleviation • Labour
Movement in India • To Lift the Submerged • Caste
• To Brahmans • Widow-remarriage • Polygamy
without Responsibility • Brahmacharya • Value of
Young Men's Associations • Resurrection of Indian
Women • The Shakti • Religion • Gift of the East
• Listen, Brothers! Let us Think about Truth • Special
Religious Duty • Religion and Patriotism • Your
Mother, India is Appealing • In the White Light of
India, a Nation • Culture • Indian Ideals of Art
• Priest of the Beautiful • Release through Music
• Hindu gods in Art • India's Unique Genius
• Fertilizing Charity • Begin at the Right End • India
Must not Lose her Heritage • How to Rebuild the
Nation? • Commonwealth of Brotherhood
• Coming Aryan Empire • O 'India ! Awake ! Arise !
• Consecration • In Indian Hands • India is Herself
• Citizenship • First Rigorous Training • To a Young
Prince: the Ideal of Kingship • Scouting • Find Your
Hero • A Young Man's Duty to his Country
• Volunteer Defence Corps • True Patriot • Reservoir

of Power • Master Builder • Centre of a World Commonwealth • Queen Mother • Temple of Humanity

4. Significant Speeches 215

East and West - the Destinies of Nations • Europe and India • A Lesson in Commonwealth Building • Case for India • Ideal of Duty • Speech at Manchester, UK • Indian Commerce • Social Life • Eastern Age-old Hygiene • Protection of Children • Kindness to Younger Indian Citizens • To Help the Miserable Myriads • Therefore Fight, O' Arjuna • India of Tomorrow • India's Mission among Nations • India's Destiny — World Saviour • Indian Womanhood

5. Select Letters 267

TO W. Q. Judge • Letter to Editor, Pall Mall Gazette • To the Editor of the Methodist Times

6. Annie Besant on Education 277

Education, as a National Duty • Necessity for Religious Education • Vital Necessity for Religious Education • Education of Indian Youth • Failure of the Educational System • Mass Education

SPEECHES

WRITINGS

Education • Ideals in Education • Religious Duties of the Student • True Object of Education • Education of Youth • Education of the Indian Girls • Indianise the School • Organising National Education • A Balanced Education • A System of National Education • National University • Mother Tongue • Cornerstone of the New World Order • Education of the Depressed Classes • Night Schools • To What End, Education?

7. Tributes to Greatness	349
Mahatma Gandhi • Gurudev Tagore • Lokamanya Tilak • M.A. Jinnah • Sir S. Subramania Iyer • C.Y. Chintamani, Editor, 'Leader'	
8. Golden Words of Annie	357
9. Great Life at a Glance	359
<i>Bibliography</i>	363
<i>Index</i>	367





An Illustrious Life

Introduction

Annie Besant guided thousands of men and women all over the world in their spiritual quest. She was the second President of The Theosophical Society from 1907 to 1933, was described as a 'Diamond Soul', for she had many brilliant facets to her character. She was an outstanding orator of her time, a champion of human freedom, educationist, philanthropist, and author with more than three hundred books and pamphlets to her credit.

As Annie Wood, she was born in 1847 in London into a middle-class family of Irish origin. She was always proud of being Irish and supported the cause of Irish self-rule, throughout her adult life. Her father died when she was five years old, leaving the family almost penniless. Her mother supported the family by running a boarding house for boys at Harrow. However, she was unable to support Annie and persuaded her friend Ellen Marryat to care for her.

Marryat made sure that Annie had a good education. She was given a strong sense of duty to society and an equally strong sense of what independent women could achieve. As a young woman, she was also able to travel widely in Europe. There she acquired a taste for Catholic colour and ceremony that never left her.

At nineteen she married 26 year old clergyman Frank Besant, younger brother of Walter Besant in 1887. He was an evangelical Anglican clergyman who seemed to share many of her concerns. However, almost on the eve of marriage, she had become more politicised through a visit to friends in Manchester, who brought her into contact with both English radicals and the Manchester Martyrs of the Irish Republican Fenian Brotherhood, as well as with the conditions of the urban poor. Soon Frank became vicar of Sibsey in Lincolnshire. Annie moved to Sibsey with her husband, and within a few years they had two children: Arthur and Mabel. The marriage was, however, a disaster. The first conflict came over money and Annie's independence. Annie wrote short stories, books for children and articles. As married women did not have the legal right to own property, Frank was able to take all the money she earned. Politics further divided the couple. Annie began to support farm workers, who were fighting to unionise and to win better conditions. Frank was a Tory and sided with the landlords and farmers. The tension came to a head when Annie refused to attend Communion. In 1873 she left him and returned to London. They were legally separated and Annie took her daughter with her.

Annie began to question her own faith. She turned to leading churchmen for advice. She even went to see Edward Bouverie Pusey, leader of the Catholic wing of the Church of England. When she asked him to recommend books that would answer her questions, he told her she had read too many already. Annie returned to Frank to make a last unsuccessful effort to repair the marriage. She finally left for London.

Birth and Childhood

Annie Besant was born as Annie Wood on 1 October 1847, and was educated privately in England, Germany and France. She was a devout Christian, and was married at the age of twenty to an English clergyman, Rev. Frank Besant, Vicar of Sibsey, Lincolnshire, by whom she had a son, Arthur Digby, and a daughter, Mabel. However, the awakening of her character made her challenge several of the Christian dogmas. 'It was not the challenge of unfaith', as Jinarâjadâsa was to say later, 'but rather

of a highly spiritual nature that desired intensely not only to believe but also to understand.' Unable to make logic out of Christian traditions, she left the Church in 1872 and became a freethinker, thus ruining her social position through her passion for Truth; consequently she had to leave her husband and young son.

In 1879 she matriculated at London University and went on with her studies in science but met obstacles there owing to the sexist prejudices of her time. She joined the National Secular Society in 1874 and worked in the free thought and radical movements led by Charles Bradlaugh, MP. She coedited the *National Reformer* with him and wrote many political and free-thought books and pamphlets from 1874–88. At this point her husband moved court to take their little daughter away from her, alleging that she was 'unfit' because of her ideas. This deprivation caused her profound grief. (But, when the children were older they became devoted admirers of their mother.) She was prominent in the Labour and Socialist movements, a member of the Fabian Society and Social Democratic Federation, and took an active part in Trade Union work among unskilled labourers; with Herbert Burrows she led the path-breaking match girls' strike to a successful conclusion.

Growth and Education

Young Miss Wood received her early education under the guidance of Miss Marryat, the favourite sister of Captain Marryat, the famous novelist, a maiden lady of large means. She had a perfect genius for teaching and took the greatest interest in her work. In her own words, she taught her everything except music, and for this she had a master, practising in composition, in recitation, in reading aloud English and French, and later, German, devoting herself to training her in the soundest most thorough fashion. "No words of mine," Mrs. Besant says in her Autobiography, "can tell how much I owe her, not only of knowledge, but of that love of knowledge which has remained with me ever since as a constant spur to study." With her she travelled very early in her age in France and Germany, and learned to read and write the languages of those countries and laid the foundation for that independence of thought and action for which she afterwards became famous.

Marital Bond and Separation

She was married to Evangelical Anglican Clergyman, Frank Besant in 1867. She had two children Digloy and Mabel. But the marriage broke out after the birth of two children. She fought for the sake of women, for equal wages, right of women and birth control (for women's health) In 1866, she read theosophical books written by Mr. A. P. Sinnet. In 1889, H. P. Blavatsky's "The Secret Doctrine" was given for review. After that she joined Theosophical society in May, 1889, and became Blavatsky's devoted pupil and helper. The Theosophical society was against discrimination of race, colour, gender and taught universal brotherhood.

Service in India

In 1893 she landed in India, made a tour of the country in the company of H. S. Olcott, and, by her splendid presentation of Indian philosophy and her undisguised personal preference for the Indian spiritual heritage, won the support of orthodox Brahmins to Theosophy. The transformation of the religious life in India, particularly among Hindus, is one of the wonders she performed. She was an untiring worker for the upliftment of women, and pleaded again and again for a radical change in social conditions, but never desired any modification of the Indian woman's temperament which she held to be one of the most spiritual in the world.

She soon gathered round her a band of Indians to work for the regeneration of the country and in 1898, after much planning, founded the Central Hindu School and College in Banaras (now Varanasi). A few years later she started the Central Hindu School for Girls. Theosophists from overseas came to help her in the work of the college, which was established with the object of impressing India's past glory on the minds and hearts of the students. A brilliant band of workers gathered round her, including Dr. Bhagvan Das, his brother Govinda Das, Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti, Upendranath Basu, I. N. Gurtu, and P. K. Telang, all of whom worked in an honorary capacity. Later the college became the nucleus of the Hindu University, and in recognition of Mrs. Besant's services to Indian education the degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon her in 1921.

As Lord Baden-Powell deemed that Indians were unfit to be scouts, the Indian Scout Movement was founded by her in 1918, the boys wearing Indian turbans! When Baden-Powell came to India and saw how successful was the movement created by Annie Besant, it was amalgamated with the world movement, and she was made the Honorary Scout Commissioner for India. In 1932 Baden-Powell sent her from London the highest Scout distinction, the 'Silver Wolf' medal.

Annie Besant travelled all over India and understood the middle-class Indians affected by British rule and its system of education. Many educated class were unaware of the glorious past and religion. She studied about Indian scriptures, religious texts, Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads. She learned Hindu manners and customs. She wore Indian sari and invited British who ever liked India to work in Institutions. She concentrated on character building. The word "Commonwealth" was coined by her. She instilled Patriotism through network of colleges and schools. She developed "Central Hindu college" at Banaras by working endlessly. She attended 'Sabhas' of traditional Sanskrit scholars. Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Gangadhar Sastri was a famous Sanskrit scholar and called her as "Sarvashukla Saraswathi" as he was impressed by Mrs. Besant's deep knowledge, oration and her sincerity.

Meeting with H.P. Blavatsky

Feeling dissatisfied with the negative approach of free thought, Mrs. Besant now made researches into spiritualism, hypnotism, and so forth. At this juncture Mr. W. T. Stead, the editor of *The Review of Reviews*, sent her Madame Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* to review. As she read the book, it was as if a long lost vision of truth flashed through her mind. She asked for an interview with the author, and from that first sight of HPB, her whole life changed. She abandoned her secularist ideas and also to some extent the socialist philosophy, but the new light which she received inspired her more firmly than ever to the service of the world. Her approach towards the various evils in the world changed and she began to deal with the root causes in the light of the laws which govern all existence.

Meeting with J. Krishnamurti

A new phase of Dr. Besant's activity began when she came into contact with two remarkable Indian boys, and declared that the elder of them, J. Krishnamurti, was destined to be the vehicle of the 'World Teacher', the Bodhisattva Maitreya. In 1910 she assumed the guardianship of J. Krishnamurti and his brother, and despite great difficulties launched him on his remarkable career. Mrs. Besant saw her role in Krishnamurti's life as that of a catalyst: 'Amma never told me what to do', Krishnamurti gratefully recalled in later life. She merely tried to prepare him for a worldwide regenerative mission. He was encouraged to meet people, to give talks and lead discussions. The Order of the Star in the East was organised to pave the way for the very special work he was to do.

Adopted Son

In 1909, soon after Besant's inheritance of the presidency, Leadbeater "discovered" fourteen-year-old Jiddu Krishnamurti on the private beach attached to the Theosophical Society's headquarters at Adyar. Krishnamurti had been living next to the headquarters with his father and brothers for a few months prior to this. The "discovery" started years of upheaval in the Theosophical Society, as the boy was proclaimed to be the likely "vehicle" for the expected *World Teacher*. Jiddu Krishnamurti and his younger brother Nityananda ("Nitya") were brought up by Theosophists from that moment on, and Krishnamurti was extensively groomed for his future "mission" as the new *Christ-incarnate*. The boys were soon placed under the legal guardianship of Besant, following a protracted legal battle with their father. Early in their relationship, Krishnamurti and Besant had developed a very close bond and he considered her a surrogate mother - a role she happily accepted. (His biological mother had died when he was ten years old).

In 1929, twenty years after his "discovery", Krishnamurti, who had grown disenchanted with the whole "*World Teacher Project*", repudiated the role that the leadership of the Society and many Theosophists expected him to fulfil. He denounced the concept of saviours, leaders, and spiritual teachers, and severed his ties with Theosophy. He spent the rest of his life holding

dialogues and giving public talks around the world as an unaffiliated individual speaker, becoming in the process widely known as an original, independent thinker on philosophical, psychological, and spiritual subjects. However, his love for Besant never waned, as also was the case with Besant's feelings towards him; concerned for his wellbeing after he declared his independence, she had purchased 6 acres (24,000 m²) of land near the Theosophical Society estate which later became the headquarters of the *Krishnamurti Foundation India*.

Theosophical Society

Annie Besant joined The Theosophical Society on 21 May 1889, and became a devoted pupil and helper of HPB, pledging her loyalty to the President-Founder, Col. H. S. Olcott, and the cause of Theosophy. She became the most brilliant exponent of Theosophy, both as orator and author. In 1893 she represented The Theosophical Society at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

President of the Society

She first met clairvoyant theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater in London in April 1894. They became close co-workers in the theosophical movement and would remain so for the rest of their lives. Besant became clairvoyant in the following year. In a letter dated 25 August 1895 to Francisca Arundale, Leadbeater narrates how Besant became clairvoyant.

Together they would investigate the universe, matter, thought-forms and the history of mankind through clairvoyance, and would co-author several books. In 1906 Leadbeater suddenly became the centre of controversy when it emerged that he was engaging in mutual masturbation with boys under his care and spiritual instruction — Leadbeater stated he had encouraged the practice in order to keep the boys celibate, which was considered a prerequisite for advancement on the spiritual path. He resigned from the Theosophical Society over the controversy in 1906. The next year Annie Besant became President of the Society and in 1908, with her express support, Leadbeater was readmitted to the Society. Leadbeater went on to face more accusations of improper

relations with boys; none of the accusations were proven, and Besant never deserted him. Up until Besant's presidency, the society had as one of its foci Theravada Buddhism and the island of Ceylon, where Henry Olcott did the majority of his useful work.

A Decisive Turn

Under Besant's leadership there was a decisive turn away from this and a refocusing of their activities on "The Aryavarta", as she called central India. Besant actively courted Hindu opinion more than former Theosophical leaders. This was a clear reversal of policy from Blavatsky and Olcott's very public conversion to Buddhism in Ceylon, and their promotion of Buddhist revival activities on the subcontinent.

Establishment of College

Annie set up a new school for boys at Varanasi: the Central Hindu College. Its aim was to build a new leadership for India. The boys lived like monks. They spent 90 minutes a day in prayer and studied the Hindu scriptures, but they also studied modern science. It took 3 years to raise the money for the CHC. Most of the money came from Indian Princes. In April 1911, Annie and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya met and decided to unite their forces and work for a common Hindu University at Varanasi. Annie and fellow trustees of the Central Hindu College also agreed to Government of India's precondition that the college should become a part of the new University. The Banaras Hindu University started functioning from 1 October 1917 with the Central Hindu College as its first constituent college.

As early as 1889, Blavatsky had told a group of Theosophical students that the real purpose of establishing the Society was to prepare humanity for the reception of the *World Teacher* when he appeared again on earth. This was repeated again more publicly by Besant in 1896, five years after Blavatsky's death.

Second Term as President

In 1907, after the passing of Col. H. S. Olcott, Annie Besant became the second International President of the Theosophical Society, an office which she held until her death in 1933. Mrs. Besant had always been a great traveller, having visited in the course of her

Theosophical work nearly all the countries of Europe more than once, and making several visits to the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Her great organising capacity was used to 'make theosophy practical', and action became her 'slogan'. During her presidentship, the Society grew considerably, with the addition of more than thirty-six Sections or National Societies to the initial eleven.

Dr. Besant continued to tour and lecture all over India, dealing extensively with education. Lodges of the Theosophical Society undertook to open schools wherever they could. She also tried to draw women into the movement wherever possible, for at that time women were not encouraged to take part in public life. Clear explanations of the many enigmas of life and the universe were presented in her outstanding books such as *A Study in Consciousness*, which is used in some universities as a textbook. Another of her major works, *Esoteric Christianity*, has been considered a historical document; and has helped to revive true knowledge of Christianity. Her lectures at Theosophical conventions on the great religions of the world were put into a valuable book entitled *Seven Great Religions*, presenting the core teachings of each one of them. The first edition of her English translation of the *Bhagavadgîtâ* was published in 1905.

Dr. Besant was a practical mystic, exemplifying in her life and in all her actions a lofty idealism, and a truly religious awareness — a combination found in very few people. In 1908 she announced the formation of a Theosophical Order of Service, which aimed at banding members together in groups with the motto 'Union of all who Love in the Service of all that Suffer.' From 1908 onwards Dr. Besant proceeded to enlarge the Headquarters estate at Adyar. In order to link Adyar more intimately with the rest of the Theosophical world, she started *The Adyar Bulletin*, which continued until 1929. Presently the Adyar Newsletter fulfils a similar function.

New Phase

Active in Indian Politics

A new period in Annie Besant's life began in 1913 when she became active in Indian politics, and gave a lead by claiming

Home Rule for India. She entered politics because she saw that India's independence was essential for her age-old wisdom to become a beacon for the whole world. The Home Rule movement she organised spread all over India. She used all her resources to bring together on the common platform of the 'All India Home Rule League' the two sections of the Indian National Congress which had been divided since 1907. Later she was elected President of the Indian National Congress inspiring Indians with a dynamic vision of India's future. Since the British government merely suppressed agitation but did little to remove the grievances, she started the Young Men's Indian Association in 1914 to train them for public work and donated Gokhale Hall in Madras as a centre for national awakening and free speech. She also started two journals: *The Commonwealth*, a weekly dealing with issues of national reform; and *New India*, a daily newspaper which for fifteen years was a powerful instrument promoting Home Rule and revolutionising Indian journalism.

First World War: Ten months after she began her political work, the World War broke out. India was called upon to make great sacrifices, which she did gladly but not a single word was said by any British statesman as to India's contribution. It was this blunder of British statesmen that convinced Dr. Besant that the political work in India had to continue, and could not be modified or slackened because the Empire was at war. She was interned in 1917 for three months because of her success in arousing the love of freedom in the Indian people. She took as her motto not only 'strike while the iron is hot', but also 'make it hot by striking'. She taught Indian journalists to write strong leading articles denouncing the action of the government, yet keeping within the letter of the law. As President of the Indian National Congress; she made the office one of active work throughout the year, instead of only presiding over it during the four-day annual meetings, as was the practice earlier.

Madras Parliament: Annie Besant's life was one of incredible activity. By 1918 she had started the Madras Parliament, opened Madanapalle College (now in Andhra Pradesh), inaugurated the Adyar Arts League, started the Home Rule League in Bombay, started the Girls' College in Banaras, founded the Order of the

Brothers of Service, presided over the Women's Indian Association at Adyar — from which grew the All-India Women's Conference at Poona (now Pune) in 1927 and the All-Asian Women's Conference at Lahore in 1931 — and started the Society for the Promotion of National Education (SPNE). Unfortunately, she fell into disfavour with the Indian National Congress because of her opposition to Mr. Gandhi's plan of non-cooperation and civil disobedience as she foresaw the danger of instilling disrespect for the law. Although she had a deep regard for Gandhi as someone whose life was guided by truth and compassion, she herself stood by constitutional methods for achieving political reform. Mr. Gandhi's policies were adopted and the disasters she had anticipated occurred in various parts of India. Though she became unpopular and lost her position as a political leader, she still continued with her work for India.

Home Rule Movement

Along with her theosophical activities, Annie continued to participate in concrete political struggles. She had joined the Indian National Congress. As the name suggested, this was originally a debating body, which met each year to consider resolutions on political issues. Mostly it demanded more of a say for middle-class Indians in British Indian government. It had not yet developed into a permanent mass movement with local organisation. About this time she lost her clairvoyance, and co-worker C. W. Leadbeater felt called to move to Sydney, Australia.

In 1914 war broke out in Europe. Britain needed the support of its empire in the fight against Germany. Annie said: "England's need is India's opportunity," a clear echo of an Irish nationalist slogan. As editor of a newspaper called *New India*, she attacked the (British) government of India and called for clear and decisive moves towards self-rule. As with Ireland, the government refused to discuss any changes while the war lasted.

Home Rule League: In 1916 Annie launched the Home Rule League, once again modelling demands for India on Irish models. For the first time India had a political party to fight for change. Unlike the Congress itself, the League worked all year round. It built a strong structure of local branches, enabling it to mobilise

demonstrations, public meetings and agitations. In June 1917 Annie was arrested and interned at a hill station. She flew a red and green flag in the garden to show her defiance. Congress and the Muslim League together threatened to launch protests if she were not set free. Annie's arrest had created a focus for protest, giving those who wanted long-term independence for India a chance to work together for a simple, achievable goal. The government was forced to give way and to make vague but significant concessions. It was announced that the ultimate aim of British rule was Indian self-government, and moves in that direction were promised. Annie was freed in September to a tremendous welcome from crowds all over India. In December she took over as President of Congress for a year. It was perhaps the greatest honour she received in her lifetime.

Congress President

Annie Besant fittingly became the president of Indian National Congress in 1917. Tilak declared that if we were nearer our goals, it was due to Dr. Annie Besant's sincere efforts. Gokhale considered her a true daughter of Mother India. Subash considered her a doughty fighter for Indian freedom. Jawaharlal Nehru said that in India, her memory would endure, especially for the part she played in our freedom struggle in the dark days of the Great War and afterwards. Sarojini Naidu, had this to say.

"Had it not been for her and her enthusiasm, one could not have seen Mr. Gandhi leading the cause of Indian freedom today. It was Mrs. Besant who laid the foundation of modern India – Dr. Besant was a combination of Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati."

Mahatma Gandhi on the Scene

After the war, there could be no going back. A new leadership emerged around Mohandas K. Gandhi- one of those who had written to demand Annie's release. He had returned from leading Asians in a peaceful struggle against racism in South Africa. Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's closest associate, had been educated by a Theosophist tutor. The new leadership too was committed to action that was both militant and non-violent, but there were differences between them and Annie. Despite her past,

she was not happy with their socialist leanings. Until the end of her life, however, she continued to campaign for India's independence, not only in India but also on speaking tours of Britain. In her own version of Indian dress, Mrs. Besant remained a striking presence on speakers' platforms. She produced a torrent of letters and articles demanding independence.

Spiritual Power

Those who came into intimate contact with Annie Besant were aware of her spiritual powers and first-hand knowledge of many occult matters. She used certain of her yogic powers to investigate the nature of the super-physical realms, and several books on this recondite subject were written in collaboration with her colleague, C. W. Leadbeater. A remarkable piece of writing done by them was *Occult Chemistry*, in which they described the chemical elements examined by them. The first edition was printed in 1908, when it did not appear possible to reconcile their observations with the scientific knowledge of atomic structure of those times, but recent developments in the field support them.

C. Jinarâjadâsa, a former President of the Theosophical Society, published in 1951 a third, enlarged edition of *Occult Chemistry*, containing descriptions of 111 atoms, including 14 isotopes, and the molecules of 29 inorganic compounds and 22 organic compounds. Dr. Stephen M. Phillips, a theoretical physicist, made a detailed analysis of the Besant–Leadbeater studies in the late 1970s and provided a lucid explanation and reinterpretation of their observations, reconciling them with present-day physics. She tried to accommodate Krishnamurti's views into her life, but never really succeeded. The two remained friends, however, until the end of her life. Annie Besant died in 1933 and was survived by her daughter, Mabel. After her death, her colleagues, J. Krishnamurti, Aldous Huxley, Dr. Guido Ferrando, and Rosalind Rajagopal, built Happy Valley School, now renamed Besant Hill School in her honour.

Last Journey

On 20 September 1933, Dr. Besant laid aside her physical body at Adyar. Her Presidentship spanned twenty-six years full

of glorious devoted service to the Theosophical Society and to mankind at large, and she passed away as she had lived — a warrior Soul. Mr. N. Sri Ram, who was then her Secretary, wrote the following tribute:

Dr. Besant was nothing if she was not wholehearted and whole-souled in all that she undertook, in every aim and every inner impulse. . . . Almost always, as I know from personal knowledge of how she affected various people, they were struck with the extraordinary magnetism that seemed to surround her, the brightest energy, which seemed to leave her at the end of the day almost as fresh as at the beginning.

The Descendants

The family history onward from the era in which Annie Besant lived became quite fragmented by the late 1940s. A number of Annie Besant's descendants have been traced in detail from her son Arthur Digby's side. One of Arthur Digby's daughters was Sylvia Besant, who married Commander Clem Lewis in the 1920s. They had a daughter, Kathleen Mary, born in 1934, who was given away for adoption within three weeks of the birth and had the new name of Lavinia Pollock. Lavinia married Frank Castle in 1953 and raised a family of five (Besant's great-great grandchildren) - James, Richard, David, Fiona and Andrew Castle - the last and youngest sibling being a former British professional tennis player and now television presenter and personality.