



REGENERATION OF INDIA IN SOUTH ASIA FOR ITS FREEDOM STRUGGLE : THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF ANNIE BESANT

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Abstract

Annie Besant propounded an ideology in India based upon the deeper fundamentals of the oriental and western political philosophy and culture. When Annie Besant arrived on the Indian scene in 1893, the country, in common with many other nations, was faced with the problem of adapting and adjusting her ancient cultural heritage to a set of new rapidly altering conditions brought about by immense technological changes and the British rule. During this period of transition of the Indian history and culture, the creation of a civilization, a true civic order which man could express the collective and individual goals of the good life and set about their realization, stood as the greatest political challenge.

Keywords: *Annie Besant, British, culture, India, nation, political ideology.*

Introduction

Culture, according to Annie Besant was the imprint on the mind of certain forms of knowledge, and was based on them. Unlike education, culture was not the drawing out and training of faculty, but was the result of the exercise of faculties on subjects which aroused sympathetic emotions and imaginations broadening the mind, eliminating personal, local and racial prejudices, acquiring an understanding of human nature in its many aspects, and developing the life-side rather than the form-side of creature, hence the quick internal response to other lives, and the intuition of the unity of life beneath the diversity of life-expression.¹

As a result of the British impact, the process of cultural collaboration and conflict set in India. The pulls of caste, of community, of religion, and consciousness of one's heritage conditioned political thinking and action. However one may like to repudiate these factors as narrow and myopic, the fact remains that they accounted for the growth of political consciousness in the first two decades of the twentieth century.²

The earliest phase of the interaction of western ideas and eclecticism, mutual tolerance and appreciation of the beneficent role of British Raj. The belief began to gain ascendancy that for India's progress, the introduction of western liberal institutions was the only panacea. There was also a mild descent from the tradition, but sufficiently marked. Gradually the uncritical appreciation of British rule was short-lived. The fear of Christianization led to the reorientation of attitudes.

While in one sense the elite was forward-looking in so far as the process of westernization was concerned; in another sense, it was socially and religiously conservative. This dichotomy was sharpened when men in this period became socially conservatives, but politically radical.³

Man is created by thought; and what a man thinks upon, that he becomes. So also is with Nations. India, Annie Besant explained, 'flowered out into a civilization unrivalled in the depth of its philosophy, in the spirituality of its Religion and in the perfection of the Dharma of orderly and graded individual and National life, expressing as none other has ever done that balance, that equilibrium which is yoga, that which saved her, when all the contemporaries of her splendid Nationalities have been carried away by Time's tremendous rapids. India shared their past but they did not share her future.'⁴

We may now come to what Annie Besant believed to be the basic characteristics of a sound political ideology for a nation. She said, "A national ideal to be useful must grow out of the national past. It must be a native of the soil, not an exotic."⁵ Every nation, she said, had its own line of evolution, and any attempt to make it follow the



line of evolution of another nation would be disastrous, even if it could be successful; as a matter of fact, any such attempt was doomed to failure, because it clashed with the world-plan.

Hence a political ideology of a nation, she rugged, should saturate itself with the past of the nation, distinguish clearly between “root principles” and “passing manifestations” of them, indentify itself in thought and feeling with that nation, and hold up before it the ideal which appealed to all that was best in national feeling, and strengthen and reinforce all that was noble in the national intelligence. It should seek to eliminate defects, “to lop off excrescences, to moderate exuberances, but should work within definite limits, not seeking to change its particular types, but to evolve that type to its highest possible expression.”⁶

India’s ancient system was founded on duty. But India during the nineteenth and twentieth endures was strange compound of conflicting theories and ideas. It was a strange compound of an ancient nation ruled practically by a modern people. Under such circumstances, she thought, it was part of the necessity of the case that some amongst the people themselves should translate the popular grievances and point out the popular deficits,⁷ so that a prudent policy could be followed. Those who had the power needed to be instructed in the knowledge of he wants of the people.

Annie Besant explained : “Therefore while, for my own part, I stand for the ideal of ancient India and look on that as a thousand fold loftier than the mushroom civilizations that have grown up in later days, nonetheless am I bound to admit that we must deal with the country as we have it, and that where you are pushed into western methods you must adopt your own methods somewhat, so as to meet the new conditions, so as to deal with the new ways of thought.”⁸

Annie Besant piloted and participated in many political activities in the seventies and eighties of the nineteenth century in England, had given her a great insight into various aspects of practical politics. But the situation in India was different. Her views had undergone a vital change. Some of the main factors which brought about the change were : (a) Spirituality of India and her growing belief in the greatness of the Indian thought: (b) Her new-found idealism in theosophy; (c) Indo-British friendship.

It was mainly the spirituality of India which had the greatest influence on her political ideology. She believed with Havell that it would not profit India to gain the whole world and lose her own sou.⁹ Invasions and even the establishment of a foreign Empire and foreign Kingdoms previous to the invasion and triumph of the East India Company in 1757 had not touched the soul or spirit of India.

In her Anniversary Address in February 1900 she expressed that with the revival of spirituality alone, India could regain her greatness and behind it would follow other things, intellectual strength, material wealth, and all the other things that enter into the growth of national life.¹⁰

India’s ancient character was predominantly spiritual, and the social policy that was its natural expression was shaped to give effect to spiritual ideas and to subordinate the lower nature to the higher, so that the nation might be the “School of souls”, and growth and development of the soul might be on every hand aided and encouraged. India, even in her present low state, and despite the loss of spiritual life and the near extinction of spiritual fire, yet remained “the one country where spirituality still hovered in are very atmosphere and where external surroundings helped the soul to rise instead of fettering it to earth.”¹¹

The second great influence was her new-found idealism in theosophy. She was convinced that an empire could be founded on brotherhood, on righteousness and on truth, and visualized an empire which was based upon peace and justice, within which a new civilization might gradually grow up, which should stand for peace, not war, cooperation, not competition, education, not cramming, comfort, not pauperism. In a lecture that she delivered on



“Theosophy and Imperialism. “Though her daily New India, Annie Besant advocated brotherhood and equality between the two people.¹²

Annie Besant was of the view that from the king on his throne to the poorest laborer in the street, the ideal should be the ideal of duty and service, where wisdom ruled and love inspired.¹³ Thus, on the basis of her theosophical belief, Annie Besant worked for the possibility of establishing a world empire based on the brotherhood of man in which she believed the friendship of India and England was indispensable. Therefore, the next point which impressed itself upon her political ideology was to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two countries. England and India were bound together, and Annie Besant wanted to strengthen their relations on the basis of equality and brotherhood. She pointed out that when two nations came into touch with each other, each had something to learn, especially where two such nations as India and England were concerned. India, she said, had been enjoying a high state of civilization long before the seed of western civilization were sown. While emphasizing loyalty to the British throne which stood as the “dignified symbol of a common Endeavour”, she gave no special place to the English people themselves as the conquering race. She fought for equality of races, friendliness and modesty among those who ruled, and self-respect among those who were ruled.

Annie Besant believed that the basis of Indian politics should be national and indigenous. It should be based upon the revival of her ancient literature and language, by awakening the youth of the country to the Indian ideals of life, by building up the nation through encouragement of its national dress, manufactures and arts. She pointed out that reforms to be successful in India must be based upon Indian ideals practiced in thought and action.¹⁴

While emphasizing the role of the classics in the life of a nation, she pointed out that for hundreds of years in the West the cultivation of classics, Greek and Latin, was regarded as absolutely necessary for what was called education of a gentleman, and those who were ignorant of the classics were regarded as uneducated. The training of intellect gave a certain definite strength and refinement of expression. India also had her own ancient language which lay at the root of her vernaculars, a knowledge of which opened out to her the greatest literature the world had yet produced and was of vital importance to the development of the nation.

Her belief in the common language of a nation was not merely a convenience, but was a tie which bound heart to heart and mind to mind. The idea of having a foreign language as a common language was ridiculous proposal. A common language like Sanskrit which was the language of the ancient books, and mother of vernaculars, would make men feel “the tie of brotherhood, instead of different races and tend far more to the national feeling.”¹⁵

As the future was in the hands of the young, she believed that they should be taught Indian history, Indian literature, and Indian customs, and that would make a real nation. Thus the entire Indian nation could be built up by the encouragement of national feeling, by maintaining traditional dress, and ways of living. This was the point, she remarked, which went to the very root of Indian revival and was not simply matter of health, of convenience, and of economy; for the Indian dress suited the Indian climate, not only because it was light, but also because its material could go through water daily, and was more suited to a hot country than the western dress which was own unwashed over and over again. Hence there was no reason, no common sense, which should make the Indian lay it aside, when the experience of thousands of years had shown it to be the best kind of dress for India. She pointed to the dangers of westernization.

Conclusion

Annie Besant’s political ideology was thus based upon India’s religious, social, economic and national revival. The influences which shaped her political views were the spirituality of India, the Indo-British friendship and her new found idealism in theosophy for the establishment of a Commonwealth of Nations and a world Empire on the basis of equality, love and brotherhood of man. It would thus be seen that her political ideology was both wider and different than the two main political ideologies prevalent in India, viz. moderate and extremist.



Annie Besant evolved a political ideology, which was based upon her deep understanding of the eastern and Western cultures. Her political ideology had a social as well as a religious background. She insisted on the preservation of India's ancient tradition and culture, seeking only to adopt the western democratic culture to suit the changed Indian conditions. To her the science of politics was an aspect of the Divine Wisdom whose principles were firmly based on the bedrock of humanity's spiritual oneness and not on expediency.

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