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**Dr. Kalpana Kumari**  
Assistant Professor, Dr. Zakir  
Hussain Teachers' Training  
College, Benta, Darbhanga,  
Bihar, India

## Role of theosophical philosophy in education in India

**Dr. Kalpana Kumari**

### Abstract

Annie Besant had a great education from the early years. She studied several books related to philosophy and religion. In 1866, she married with a clergyman Mr. Franck Besant but her marriage tie was broken in 1873. She left the church and became a thinker. She came India in 1893 and made India her home. She came to India as a leader of the Theosophical Ideal of Education and founded many schools and colleges on its principles. She worked for progressive education and founded Hindu College in 1898 and later it is established as Benaras Hindu University by the outstanding attempt of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya in 1916. She wrote several books and pamphlets on religion, politics, socialism, education and the women status. She studied Hinduism, and its philosophy, Bhagadgita, the Mahabharata and other spiritual thought and action for respectand understanding of India's religion and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Education, Religion, Politics, Socialism and philosophy.

### Introduction

Annie, popularly known as Dr. Annie Besant, was born in 1847 at London in United Kingdom. Her father's name was Sri Wood belonged to Devonshire and her mother was Irish. Her father was died when she was at the age of 5 years. Miss Marryat made arrangement for her primary education. She was influenced by her mother who taught her simplicity and piety. She was very much influenced by Miss Marryat, the teaching and philosophy of Madam Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society in London and Charles Bradlaugh. Annie Besant had a great education from the early years. She studied several books related to philosophy and religion. In 1866, she married with a clergyman Mr. Franck Besant but her marriage tie was broken in 1873. She left the church and became a thinker. She came India in 1893 and made India her home. She came to India as a leader of the Theosophical Ideal of Education and founded many schools and colleges on its principles. She worked for progressive education and founded Hindu College in 1898 and later it is established as Benaras Hindu University by the outstanding attempt of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya in 1916. She wrote several books and pamphlets on religion, politics, socialism, education and the women status. She studied Hinduism, and its philosophy, Bhagadgita, the Mahabharata and other spiritual thought and action for respect and understanding of India's religion and cultural heritage.

Annie Besant was a British political activist of Irish descent. She was known all over the English speaking world as one of the most remarkable women of her day. She came to India in 1893, as a leader of the Theosophical Society, which she had joined in 1889. The remarkable feature of Besant's early life in England was that she never remained stuck to a particular cause. She was a freethinker, science teacher, radical, Fabian socialist, atheist and finally a Theosophist. There were so many different phases in her life and none of them we reinter-linked. This feature of her character is quite evident during her stay in India, when she first led herself into educational movement and after twenty years embarked into politics, though she had vowed not to enter into politics again.

After embracing Theosophy under the tutelage of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian mystic, Besant embarked on her mission of propagating theosophical ideals and reached the shores of India in 1893. However, in India Hinduism fascinated her to such an extent that she devoted herself towards the cause of up lift of Hinduism. She toured throughout the length and breadth of India and lectured intensely on the lofty ideals of Hinduism. She believed that Hinduism was in a decadent state and emphasised on the need for its revival.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Kalpana Kumari**  
Assistant Professor, Dr. Zakir  
Hussain Teachers' Training  
College, Benta, Darbhanga,  
Bihar, India

Besant was of the opinion that absence of religious education in government schools and colleges and teaching of Christianity in missionary educational institutions was responsible for religious neutrality and scepticism among Hindu youths and hence the fallen state of Hinduism. To remedy this state, she propagated the idea that religious education of Hindu youths should become an integral part of their education. In order to concretise her ideas on religious education of Hindu youths Besant established a college and school for religious education of Hindu youths in the holy city of Benares in the then North Western Provinces of British India, in 1898. Besant is widely known in India for her political activities as founder of Home Rule Movement and as the first women President of Indian National Congress, the chief political party involved in freedom struggle. Political career of Besant in India has been extensively researched (Chandra, 2001). However, her educational ideas and activities are little known.

### Review of Literature

Mukherjee & Mukherjee, (1957) <sup>[5]</sup> this aspect of her career in India has largely been overlooked by the Historians in general and Historians of education in particular. Few Scholarly works have touched upon Besant's criticism of Curzon's University Act.

Chattopadhyay (1980) <sup>[4]</sup> dealt with the role of Besant in foundation of the first denominational University of India, the Benares Hindu University.

Rao (2013) <sup>[2]</sup> He observed that national education had a de-nationalising effect on the society, hence it should be substituted by religious education.

Taylor (1992) <sup>[3]</sup> her views on girls' education echoed the prevalent patriarchal hegemony of the orthodox Hindu society. Though she advocated for the education of girls but there was a lack of real commitment.

Sarojini Naidu (1947) <sup>[1]</sup> significantly quotes as, "As a writer Annie Besant had done great service to India. She translated the Bhagad Gita in English and spread its message in the west. 'Hindu Dharma', 'Hindu Ideals'. 'Message of Upanishad', 'Sons and Daughters of India' and through many other books on similar subjects, she tried to open our eyes and awaken us. She continued to write over a period of 60 years, books covering a vast range of subjects. Her books and pamphlets number over 400".

### Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study is based on:

To find out Dr. Annie Besant's contribution regarding Indian Philosophy and its philosophical outlooks in the field of education.

### Methodology

This paper is descriptive in nature. It is mainly based on secondary data and is largely collected from different sources like books, journals, articles, and periodicals. This study is conducted mainly by drawing upon the works of Dr. Annie Besant's philosophy by applying analytical cum descriptive method.

### Ideas on modern education

During early years in India Besant emphasised on spread of Sanskrit education however she could not get support for the same and yielded to the public demand for English education. English education, however, was to be reserved

for upper class (and upper caste) of the Hindu society.

Girls and boys belonging to lower castes (so called untouchables or depressed classes) had no claim to modern education in her scheme of education. Besant's advocacy of modern education for gaining livelihood seems to be paradoxical as she herself lamented the Western education of the day as a degree factory where the sole priority was to get a degree to «go into Government service or into the learned professions. She further condemned, «a man becomes a Bachelor of Arts not that he may know literature, not that he may understand history, not that he may be a student of philosophy, but that he may be a Vakil [lawyer] or a Government servant (Besant, 1903, p. 9). Besant considered emotional development of children as necessary aspect of their education so as to ensure the well being and prosperity of the nation. Nonetheless, in Besant's plan of education, emotional development was more crucial for those involved in agricultural and other manual occupations to keep them bound to their ancestral occupations lest they may enter into learned professions which would pose a threat to the social harmony. Moreover, through emotional development Besant aimed to infuse into Indian youth the ideals of a good citizen worthy to be a part of the Empire, as revealed in her following statement, I dream of a time when India will help to build the empire with that genius for statesmanship and clear insight which are found from time to time in great Indian ministers. These qualities will be utilised for the good of the empire, for the good of the mighty whole of which India is a part. The times are gone by for small nations, for petty states, and for little peoples. The tendency now is towards raising a vast realm, united by common aims and common love. India in future should aid to build such an empire, should help to bear its burdens and share its responsibilities. I dream of a time when India, England, Australasia and Canada will all join hands to making of common empire, when India's children will bring them priceless treasures to the enriching of that empire. But for his/her children must first build their character, for without that they will never be able to accomplish aught (Besant, 1903, pp. 25-26). Besant stressed on scientific education rather than a pure literary one for the intellectual development of the children and for the economic advancement of the nation. Nonetheless, practically she did very little for the promotion of scientific education as most of her time and energy was devoted towards the propagation of the idea of religious education of the Hindu youths.

### Religious education

The most important aim of education, believed Besant, was imparting religious education in schools and Colleges. She urged the members of different religious communities to set up their own educational institutions imparting religious instruction in their respective faiths. Besant was chiefly concerned with the religious education of Hindu boys, as Hinduism fascinated her. She attributed the lack of religious education in schools and Colleges as the reason for growing scepticism of Hindu youths and therefore advocated for religious education along Hindu lines for Hindu boys. She remarked, the field that we seek to occupy has been empty up to the present; it is a field which has been until now untilled (Besant, 1942, p. 1). Nonetheless, Besant was not the pioneer in the field of religious education in India. Voice of dissent against secular education in Government educational institutions were also raised by Tilak as early in

1881 in *Mahratta*.

In 1886, Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College, the pioneer in the field of religious education, was established by Lala Hans Raj at Lahore, based on the ideals of Arya Samaj established by Dayanand Saraswati. In this College secular education was combined with religious education. Besant's scheme was different from the College of Lala Hans Raj in the sense that while Besant advocated for orthodox Hinduism the latter repudiated it. Although Besant lectured rigorously in defence of Hinduism and its revival but her knowledge of Hinduism was never original.

India through the glamorous mist created by her Brahmin Guru and in later years she mostly depended on the knowledge gained through the Theosophist Hindus such as Bhagavan Das, Upendra Nath Basu, Govinda Das and others. She toured and lectured intensely throughout the country and tried to sensitize people about the importance of religious instruction in schools. She advocated for the religious education as a necessary part of the curriculum because the religion forms the basis of morality, art and literature. She propagated the idea that the uplift of India was possible by reform along spiritual and educational lines only.

Besant wore the Theosophical boots» to tread on the path of religious education for Hindus. However, the pertinent issue here is that being a Theosophist she was supposed to give equal value to all religions and therefore should have based her programme of religious education on Theosophical lines. But she was not only heavily inclined towards Hinduism but also she propagated the idea of superiority of Hindu religion as compared to other religions. She argued, Hinduism has taught them (the teachings of immanence of God and the solidarity of mankind) with supreme lucidity, because its religion and its philosophy were shaped by occultists addressing the subtlest and keenest brains that humanity has yet evolved. Further she remarked, every religion has taught these great truths more or less clearly, has proclaimed them in a language more or less definite, according to the intelligence of the people to whom they were addressed. Thus, implicitly conveying the message that Hinduism and hence the Hindus are superior to other religions. Within the Theosophical circle the inclination of Besant towards Hinduism was not welcomed as Theosophy stood for Unity and Brotherhood of all religions. The editors of the magazine *The Indian Theosophist*, Sydney V. Edge and Walter Old, in their comments on Mrs. Besant's Northern tour, charged her "advocacy of Hinduism, pure and simple", was not quite in harmony with "the broad eclecticism" of the Theosophical Society and had therefore sorely disappointed many of its earnest members. However, undaunted she continued her endeavour of «revival of Hinduism» through the means of inclusion of religious education in schools.

Still another aspect to the issue of religious education championed by Besant is that by giving superior status to Hinduism and advocating Hindu schools and Colleges solely for Hindu youth, she was creating division in the society based on the religious hatred. Although as a Theosophist she advocated, one great value of Theosophy to India lies in its eradication of religious hatreds and of religious disdain. But, in reality, her advocacy of superiority of Hinduism over other religions was fostering the same. Her ideas of religious education of Hindu boys were quite in contradiction to her role as a Theosophist.

### **Education of lower castes and depressed classes**

Traditionally, Hindu social order denied education to lower castes and depressed classes. The advent of modern education opened, to some extent, the doors of knowledge to these sections of population. There was, however, a general resistance among upper castes towards the education of these classes because of the fear that once educated the lower caste people will leave their ancestral occupation and compete for government jobs with them. Besant's ideas towards education of lower castes were no different from those of the upper caste elite.

### **Education of girls**

In 1904, Besant wrote a pamphlet on *The Education of Indian Girls* to serve as the basis of a national movement for education of girls. In this pamphlet she gave a detailed outline of the content of Indian' girls education. Annie Besant's Ideas on education of girls were highly gendered. Of hundreds of lectures which she delivered in India on education only two to three lectures were dedicated to the girls' education. Even these lectures were heavily laden with gendered notion with regard to the nature of education suitable for girls. She favoured such an education for Indian girls that would prepare her for her future role as a housewife. She was completely against that education of girls which would make her competent for getting a job in Government department. Besant presumed the future life of an Indian girl within the confines of household therefore she advocated for a brief period of school life for Indian girls with no exposure to western field of knowledge. She outright rejected the education of Indian girls on western lines because it would *unsex* woman. She prescribed a curriculum for girls' education consisting of Religious and moral education, literary education, scientific education, artistic education and physical education in accordance with her future role of an ideal homemaker.

The physical education for girls prescribed by her was narrowed down to the delicate movement of body suited to the very character of a girl. For boys she prescribed Indian and western exercises and different types of sports but these had no place in the physical education for girls. Such an education, remarked Besant, would make the Indian girl fit to be the "Lakshmi of the house" making the Indian home «the centre of spirituality, the strength of the national religious life. Besant's ideal of education of Indian girls was centred around the notion of revival of Indian womanhood and thus inculcating in them the tenderness and fidelity of Sita and Savitri, the intellectual grandeur of Gargi, the all-sacrificing spirituality of Maitreyi. For her the education of girls was not for the sake of girls' right but for the sake of preparing them as good mother and wife, an efficient homemaker reflecting the qualities of an ideal Indian woman. Her gendered notion of girls' education was very shrewdly chosen to be in accordance with the Orthodox Hindu values. By prescribing such an education for girls she sought to appease Orthodox Hindus although she could never secure their support.

### **Conclusion**

Though Besant was a Theosophist and had come to India to spread Theosophical ideals of Universal Brotherhood of all religions but her admiration for Hindu religion made her heavily inclined towards it. Her belief that Hindu religion was in a fallen state due to the absence of religious teaching

in schools and colleges led to the establishment of an institution only (later on mainly) for Hindu boys where religion was to be an indispensable part of their education. The importance laid on the religious education of Hindu youths was a discordant note in the sense that it would further enhance the gulf between various religions in the society, particularly between Muslim and Hindus. Within Hindu religion, Besant had great reverence for Upper castes, particularly Brahmins. Lower castes and the Outcastes (the depressed classes) had no place in her scheme of education. She advocated the importance of Modern education for getting government jobs. However, it was to be restricted to upper castes, as she believed that the lower castes and the Outcastes must remain attached to their ancestral occupation. While magnificent school buildings with modern infrastructure were a prerequisite for the education of upper castes' children, a makeshift school providing rudiments of knowledge was sufficient for the downtrodden castes in Besant's educational plan.

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