

## ***Educational Ideas of Annie Besant***

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**Abstract:** Annie Besant was an Irish political activist, free-thinker and Fabian socialist. 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 to promoting Hinduism. She toured the length and breadth of India, and lectured intensely on the lofty ideals of Hinduism. However, 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 youth, and hence the fallen state of Hinduism. To remedy this state, she emphasised the need for its revival, and propagated the idea that religious education of Hindu youths should become an integral part of their education. In order to concretise these ideas, Besant established a college and school for the religious education of Hindu youth 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 the struggle for national freedom. Although Besant's political career in India has been extensively researched, little is known about her educational ideas and activities. This paper analyses Besant's ideas on education, and show how, rather than being a promoter of modernity, she supported, upheld and institutionalised caste hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Annie Besant; religious education; depressed classes; female education.

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### **1. Introduction**

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» (Nethercot, 1961, p. 13). 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 were

inter-linked. She was a «woman of swift decisions» (Shaw quoted in Kumar, 1981, p. 39). 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<sup>1</sup>.

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 «uplift» 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. 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<sup>2</sup>. 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 (Kumar, 1981; Bakshi, 1990; Geetha & Rajadurai, 1995; Chaganti, 1996; Chandra, 2001). However, her educational ideas and activities are little known. 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 (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1957; Basu, 1974; Ghosh, 2000). Chattopadhyay (1980) has dealt with the role of Besant in foundation of the first denominational University of India, the Benares Hindu University. In her study on Benares Hindu University, Renold (2005) has briefly discussed Besant's endeavour with regard to religious education. Kumar (2000) in her scholarly work on History of education in Benares has analysed Besant's ideas on religious education but ideas with regard to modern education, education of masses and female education do not find place in this work. This paper attempts to shed light on educational ideas of Besant with special reference to modern education, religious education and female education and aims to show how instead of being harbinger of modernity, she used education as a tool for reinforcing religion, caste and gender, based divisions in an already segregated Indian society.

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<sup>1</sup> The British Government was alarmed as Besant had a very controversial career in politics in England. In order to sway the Government she claimed that her work in India would be purely educational to arouse the Indians' sense of self respect and pride in the greatness of their cultural traditions. See: Nethercot (1961).

<sup>2</sup> The college was established with the help of Theosophist Hindus for upper caste Hindu boys. This college, named as Central Hindu College, later became the nucleus of the Banaras Hindu University, the first denominational University of India.

## **2. 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. She argued,

Boys of the upper classes must, under the circumstances of the day, receive an English education. Without this they cannot gain a livelihood and it is idle to kick against facts we cannot change. We can take the English education, then, for granted (Besant, 1917, p. 108).

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» (Besant, 1903, p. 9). 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). She criticized the English education imparted in Government institutions and considered it as a failure because,

It is simply cramming the boys' head with a lot of disjointed facts, poured into his head as into a basket, that is to be emptied out again in the examination room, and the empty basket carried out again into the world. It is not a good education which, when a boy has passed his examination, leaves him nervous wreck, exhausted as to his body and overstrained as to his brain. When a boy goes out of the College he should be full of life, vigour, full of energy and full of delight in his young life, to take up the burden of the work of the world. He should not be nerve exhausted and nerve-overstrained, when he has finished his educational career (Besant, 1903, p. 9).

In the backdrop of flawed educational machinery of Government, she suggested fourfold aims of education as noted below,

Now the getting of degree is not the true aim of education. The aim of education is to draw out the faculties of the boy on every side of his nature, to develop in him every intellectual and moral power, and to strengthen him physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, that he may turn out at the end of his College carrier a useful, patriotic, pious gentleman, who respects himself and those around him (Besant, 1903, p. 9).

She insisted that «the training of boy's body is as important a part of education as the training of his mind» (Besant, 1903, p. 11) and further opined that «no school, no College does its duty where physical training is not definitely a part of

the curriculum» (Besant, 1903, p. 11) because physical education is not only limited to the strengthening of the body but also leads to development of qualities such as «quickness of thought, alertness in understanding the situation, swiftness of decision, promptitude of action and accuracy of judgement» (Besant, 1903, p. 11). Moreover, she related physical education to developing the qualities of a «true patriot» (Besant, 1903, p. 11) because «his [child's] duty to his body is a part of his duty to his country and to himself» (Besant, 1903, p. 11). Therefore, she insisted

I would rather at present see an Indian boy skilfully playing on the playground than working in his class-room; because there is no doubt about the brilliancy of his intelligence, but there is a very great doubt about his practical capacity (Besant, 1903, p. 11).

Besant considered emotional development of children as necessary aspect of their education so as to ensure the well being and prosperity of the nation. She observed,

You must teach your boys to cultivate emotion on the side of love, the emotion which grows into virtues. You must teach him to discourage emotion on the side of hate, the emotion which grows into vices. You must teach him to love his fellows as if they belonged to his family, and to love his nation as if it were a part of his family, you must teach him that national life depends on the unity of the organism that we call a nation. Take an educated man whose emotional training has been neglected; how can he carry out the work of the world? He thinks of his own gain, his own prosperity, but he does not look into the national welfare. He thinks how he can profit, but not how his nation may thrive. He thinks how he may grow rich, but not how the nation may be prosperous. That individual, therefore strikes at the root of the national welfare and brings about the decay of the people (Besant, 1903, p. 13).

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. She remarked,

A number of men rush into Government service, or into the learned professions, thinking of only getting on into the world. But what meanwhile happens to India? Her agriculture gradually grow less and less effective, her industries decay, her manufactures fail, and her wealth is diminished...God has bound the classes of the nation together, and the national prosperity depends upon the public spirit of the people, upon the consideration of the whole nation, and upon the subordination of the individual gains to the general good and common prosperity (Besant, 1903, p. 15).

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. She remarked,

What is most wanted in that intellectual education is a scientific education rather than an exclusively literary one, an education that will add to the productive resources of the country and not lead only to the learned professions. I do not mean that learned professions are not necessary for the welfare of the state. They are entirely necessary but they should not absorb whole of the brilliant intelligences of the country, and starve the other side of national life, which is equally wanted for the welfare of people (Besant, 1903, pp. 16-17).

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.

### **3. Religious education**

The most important aim of education, believed Besant, was imparting religious education in schools and Colleges. She thought,

In India things have gone from bad to worse in this connection. Government Colleges teach no religion at all. The missionary Colleges teach religion which is alien to the spirit and genius of the country. The boy has to choose between no religious teaching at all, and the teaching of the religion which is different from his own. That is the worst defect of the Education in India (sic), and see how dangerous it becomes (Besant, 1903, p. 17).

She urged the members of different religious communities to set up their own educational institutions imparting religious instruction in their respective faiths.

If every religious community gave religious education to its children, if the Hindu community afforded Hindu religious instruction, if the Musalmans gave instruction in the faith of Islam, if the Parsis gave instruction in the Zoroastrian religion, and so on, leaving Christianity to be taught to Christians only, then religious education of the country would proceed along proper and healthy lines (Besant, 1903, p. 18).

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*. He observed that national education had a «de-nationalising effect on the society, hence it should be substituted by religious education» (quoted in Rao 2013, p. 163). He, therefore, demanded that «Government should replace the existing syllabi... with religious texts like the Smritis, Shastras and Puranas» (Besant, 1942, p. 164). The difference between Besant and Tilak's views on religious education lies in Tilak's insistence on Government to replace the existing syllabi with religious texts while Besant exempted the Government from taking up the task of religious education and hence she argued,

Again, it is not just to blame Government for the want of religious education. Government cannot give it, lest it should infringe the religious neutrality on which the peace of India depends. Government is pledged to «no religious interference». Government must not do it, you ought to do it yourselves. Every community should take up the question of religious education. Now, two of the great communities in India, the Hindus and the Musalmans, are beginning to deal effectively with the question of religious education. The Musalmans have set an example in this direction by the foundation of their College at Aligarh. The Hindus are following in the same important path by the foundation of the Central Hindu College at Benares (Besant, 1917, pp. 18-19).

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. In her early years «she saw

India through the glamorous mist created by her Brahmin Guru» (Williams, 1931, p. 228) 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» (Besant n.d., p. 36). She propagated the idea that the uplift of India was possible by reform along spiritual and educational lines only.

If India is to rise again, if she is to stand high among the nations, how shall that re-ascend (sic) be conducted? By retracing the past, by remounting the past steps in order. She must begin by reviving the spirituality, the root source of all. Then she must build and revive education, substituting for the present an education suited to the crying needs of the country; and when spirituality is re-established, when education is wisely chosen and wisely directed, then the restoration of the natural prosperity is inevitable, it cannot be escaped (Besant, 1904, p. 8).

She stressed the wisdom and morality of Hindu ideals, the splendid past of India, and the need for the Indians to regain the pride in themselves and their civilization which they had lost and were looking towards the West.

It was, and is, my belief that Hinduism is the most potent lever for raising India into National Self-Consciousness; it was that belief which made me spend my first few years here chiefly in the effort to arouse Hindus to a recognition of the supreme value of their National religion. The educational propaganda trod closely on the heels of the religious work, the urging of a National education which should recognize religion and morals as an integral part of the teaching of youth (New India 9 June 1915)

She stressed, «there is no knowledge more necessary for a boy than the knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of his religion. This knowledge should therefore be imparted to him in a simple, elementary form in school, and in further detail in College» (Besant, 1917, p. 393) and further emphasised that «Hindu boys should daily perform the Sandhya, after bathing, according to the custom of his caste and family; if he does this, with concentrated attention and devotional feeling, he has fulfilled the duty of worship suitable to his state» (Besant, 1917, p. 393).

Besant believed that the advent of Theosophical movement in India was a step towards the spiritual reform and the next role the Theosophy had to play was that along the educational reform. She opined,

Theosophy has passed to the second step, the step of education, and is concerning itself through the length and breadth of the land with the education fitted to the needs of India. What must that education be? First of course religious and moral; without that nothing can be achieved; that is essential and

fundamental; the building up of character in the young, so that they may be fit to the citizens of a country, so that they may grow into the lovers of their own land (Besant, 1904, p. 14)

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» (Besant n.d., p. 45). 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» (Besant n.d., p. 45). 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» (Nethercot, 1963, p. 21). 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» (Besant, 1904, p. 13). 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.

#### **4. 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. She questioned,

Are these crores of people, amounting to one-sixth of the population, to be added to the myriads of clerks, whose number has already forced their wages down to starvation point?... Are the millions of the village population to be made discontented with their fields, and to crowd into offices? (Besant, 1913, p. 14).

This argument of Besant finds echo in the ideas of orthodox Hindu leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the staunch orthodox Hindu leader of Bombay presidency. While opposing the education of masses he argued,

You take away a farmer's boy from the plough, the blacksmith's boy from the bellows and the cobbler's boy from his awl with the object of giving him liberal education...and the boy learns to condemn the profession of his father, not to speak of the loss to which the latter is put by being deprived of the son's assistance at the old trade. Having done this the boy looks up to the Government for employment: you remove him from a sphere where he would have been contented and happy and useful to those who depend upon him, and to teach him to be discontented with his lot and with the Government (Tilak quoted in Rao, 2013, p. 157).

The schools established by Besant for the education of high caste children had magnificent buildings but for the education of rural masses she suggested rudimentary schools as these «could be raised by village labour» (Besant, 1913, p. 16). The elementary education of masses, in Besant's scheme, consisted only of 3 or 4 years starting from 5 to 8 or 9 years (Besant, 1913, p. 16). After this stage, she remarked,

the great mass of labouring population should pass into the practical training necessary for the efficient discharge of the craft by which they are, in the future, to serve their country and to earn their own living, winning prosperity alike for India and for themselves (Besant, 1913, p. 45).

Regarding secondary education, she suggested,

Secondary education was not for the boys and girls whose future lies in handicrafts, in agriculture, in domestic and small shop-assistant service, in factories, in the lowest ranks of the petty officials-policemen, soldiers, office peons, chowkidars, and the like (Besant, 1913, p. 45).

By advocating the inclusion of «sowing seeds, caring for plants, basket making, learning to saw, to hammer and to make village tools» at the elementary level and of the «practical training in the ancestral crafts» after elementary level in the curriculum of masses and by denying them secondary education, Besant attempted to reinforce the socio-economic inequalities in the caste ridden Indian society which would forbid the masses any choice for their career keeping them adhered to their ancestral jobs or the jobs assigned to them by their caste. This scheme of Besant resembled the «two-tier system» advocated by the landed elites and Indian leaders

who proposed that curriculum for masses should be different from those of upper class. For instance, Peary Mohan Mukerjee, argued in opposition to introduction of compulsory education as,

Government should aim to make the masses into useful members of the society like servants, shepherds, apprentices and not scholars as the educate mock at all distinctions of caste, wealth and lineage which had enthralled them for centuries (quoted in Rao, 2013, p. 160).

Similarly Tilak argued that «the curriculum taught to upper caste children was unsuitable to peasant children...and rational system of education meant teaching of only those subjects which would be necessary for their living» (Rao, 2013, p. 161) and he insisted that «lower classes should be trained as carpenters, blacksmiths, masons and tailors» (Rao, 2013, p. 161).

As far as education of the so called «untouchables» was concerned Besant advocated for separate schools for them. She condemned those who were favouring common schools for upper caste and untouchable children,

A difficulty arises at the outset, for one class of community, moved by a noble feeling of compassion and benevolence, but not adding thereto a careful and detailed consideration of the conditions, demands for the children of the pariah community admission to the schools frequented by the sons of the higher classes, and charges with lack of brotherhood those who are not in favour of this policy. It becomes, therefore, necessary to ask whether brotherhood is to mean levelling down, and whether it is usual in a family to treat elder children and the babies in exactly the same way (Besant n.d., p. 77).

Though she talked of brotherhood (one of the tenets of Theosophy), but for her «Brotherhood does not mean identity, and brotherhood does not imply a flat dead level of absolute similarity and so called equality» (Besant 1895, p. 5). With such a notion of brotherhood she criticised the idea of equal treatment of the depressed classes with that of upper castes. According to her,

It is a zeal not according to knowledge- and not according to nature- which would substitute equality for brotherhood, and demand from the culture and refined that they should forfeit the hardly won fruits of the education of generations, in order to create an artificial equality, as disastrous to the progress of the future as it would be useless for the improvement of the present (Besant n.d., p. 77).

She propagated the idea that if the upper caste treats depressed classes equally then it is not brotherhood but lowering down the status of the former. Therefore, in order to bring about the uplift of depressed classes, according to her, the higher caste should not go down from their level rather depressed classes should be raised to the level of former and «Education», she opined, «is the lever by which we may hope to

raise them» [the depressed classes] (Besant n.d., p. 77), but in separate schools. In support of her argument for a separate school for the «depressed classes» she said,

Their [«depressed class» children] bodies, at present, are ill odorous and foul, with the liquor and strong smelling foods out of which for generations they have been built up; it will need some generations of purer food and living to make their bodies fit to sit in the close neighbourhood of a school room with children who have received bodies from an ancestry trained in habits of exquisite personal cleanliness, and fed on pure foodstuffs. We have to raise the depressed classes to a similar level of physical purity, not to drag down the clean to the level of the dirty, and until this is done the close association is undesirable (Besant n.d., p. 78).

Justifying her stance, she argued, «since the children of “depressed classes” are dirty they need to be cleaned, therefore first daily lessons for these children should be a bath which cannot be done in the higher caste schools where children come after taking bath and well fed class» (Besant n.d., p. 78). She further argued that since children learn by imitation, so in a common school with higher caste children, the higher caste children would imitate the bad habits of the «depressed class» children. In her own words,

Children learn manner chiefly by imitation...if at the school they are to be made to associate with children not thus trained, they will quickly fall into the ways which they see around them....Ought the children of families in which good manners and courtesy are hereditary, to be robbed of their heritage, a robbery that enriches no one, but drags the whole nation down? (Besant n.d., p. 79).

However, the significant point here is that, if the children learn by imitation then this would be equally true the other way round in case of «depressed class» children also. That is, in a common school the depressed class children may learn good habits by imitating the higher caste children, so a common school would be far more effective than separate. Exemplifying from England, she noted,

In England it has been never been desirable to educate girls and boys of all classes side by side, and such grotesque equalising of the unequal would be scouted. Eton and Harrow are admittedly the schools for higher classes; Rugby and Winchester are also schools for gentlemen’s sons, though somewhat less aristocratic. Then come a number of schools, frequented chiefly by sons of the provincial middle class. Then the Board Schools, where the sons of artisans and the general manual labour classes are taught; and below all these, for the waifs and strays, are the «ragged schools». The name of which indicates the type of their scholars, and the numerous charitable institutions (Besant n.d., p. 79).

To the indifference shown by the Government schools over the issue and admission of depressed classes along with higher classes Besant criticised the Government by saying that «they would not deal so with the sons of their own people,

though they may be careless of the sons of Indians, and lump them all together, clean and dirty alike» (Besant n.d., p. 80) and advised upper caste Indians that «it is to the interest of the Indians that they should send their sons where they are guarded from coarse influences as Englishmen guard their own sons in England» (Besant n.d., p. 80).

Thus, it is not without reason to conclude that Besant had a very negative stance towards the depressed classes and their education. By her advocacy of separate education of these classes she outright ventured to perpetuate the inequality and discrimination against these classes inherent in the society.

## 5. 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» (Besant, 1904, p. 1). 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. 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» (Taylor, 1992, p. 331). 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 (Besant quoted in Forbes, 2012, p. 44). She argued,

Their [Indian girl] life is family life; of what avail then to waste the years during which they should be educated to play their part well in the family, in giving them an education suited for western social-life but entirely unsuited to their own? The school life of the girl in India must necessarily be brief and it is therefore the more important that she should spend that brief time to the best possible advantage. Of what possible value can it be to her to know all about the wars of the Roses and the dates of the great English battles? How much is she the better for learning Latin? Of what value to her is to pass matriculation examination? Why should ordinary Indian girls have a detailed knowledge of English geography, while ordinary English girls are never taught details of Indian geography- for sufficient reason that it would not be any use to them? (Besant, 1917, pp. 113-14)

She suggested the education of Indian girls on national lines as,

The national movement for girls' education must be on national lines; it must accept the general Hindu conceptions of woman's place in the national life, not the dwarfed modern view but the ancient ideal. It must see in the woman the mother and the wife, or, as in some cases, the learned and pious ascetic, the Brahnavadini of older days. It cannot see in her the rival and competitor of man in all forms of outside and public employment, as woman, under different economic conditions, is coming to be, more and more, in the West...the lines of western female education are not suitable for the education of eastern girls... But the national movement for education of girls must be the one which meets the national needs, and India needs notably trained wives and mothers, wise and tender rulers of the household educated teachers of the young, helpful counsellors of the young, helpful counsellors of their husbands, skilled nurses of the sick, rather than girl graduates, educated for the learned professions (Besant, 1904, p. 2).

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. For religious education of Hindu girls she opined,

Every girl must be taught the fundamental doctrines of her religion, in a clear, simple and rational method. The Sanatana Dharma Series I and II, in the vernaculars, will suit Hindu girls as well as Hindu Boys, and girls thoroughly grounded in these will be able to study the advanced textbooks after leaving school, as they are not likely to remain there to an age fit for such study. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, in the Vernaculars, should be largely drawn on for moral instruction, as well as *Manusmriti*; and the Tulsi Das *Ramayana* should be read by all Hindi knowing girls. To this should be added the teaching of the hymns in the vernacular and stotras in Sanskrit, as well as the committal to memory of many beautiful passages from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Hamsa Gita*, and the *Anugita*, and other suitable works (Besant, 1904, pp. 3-4).

She further prescribed that «girls should be taught to worship, and simple plain explanation of worship followed should be given» (Besant, 1904, p. 4). It is a matter of great wonder that worship is something that needs to be taught! For girls showing exceptional ability «for deeper thought», she argued, «philosophical studies and explanations should not be withheld from her, so that opportunity may be afforded for the re-appearance of the type of which Maitreyi and Gargi and the women singers of the Vedas were shining examples» (Besant, 1904, p. 4). For girls belonging to other religions she suggested the use of books of their respective religion.

For literary education she suggested, «a classical language, Sanskrit, Arabic, or Persian, according to girls' religion should be learned sufficiently to read with pleasure the noble literature contained therein... and to listen with intelligent pleasure to the reading of her husband as he enjoys the masterpieces of the great writers» (Besant, 1904, p. 4). In addition to the Indian history and geography she prescribed reading-books consisting of «stories of all the sweetest and strongest women in

Indian history, so that the girls feel inspired by these noblest type of womanhood as compelling ideals, and may have before them glorious proofs of the heights to which Indian woman have climbed» (Besant, 1904, p. 5). Besant considered this building up of the ideal of Indian women necessary as a part of girls' education because she opined, «If the westernising, in a bad sense, of Indian men be undesirable, still more undesirable is such westernising of Indian women; the world cannot afford to lose the pure, lofty, tender and yet strong type of an Indian womanhood» (Besant, 1904, p. 6).

Regarding teaching of English, Besant was of the opinion that English may be taught to an Indian girl if parents of the girl are willing. Moreover, she favoured the teaching of English to girls not because she was advocating liberal education to girls but to provide a better company to their English educated husband and also to communicate with the English women if they find an opportunity to accompany their husband to foreign land. In her own words,

It is desirable, also, seeing how much English thought is dominating the minds of men, and how many sympathetic Englishwomen seek to know their Indian sisters, that the girls should learn English, and have thus opened to them the world of thought outside India; in later life they may make many a pleasant excursion into that world in the company of their husbands, and the larger horizons will interest without injuring (Besant, 1904, p. 6).

Regarding Scientific Education of the girls she remarked,

Nothing is more necessary to the Indian wife and mother, than a knowledge of sanitary laws, of the value of foodstuffs, of nursing the sick, of simple medicines, of «first aid», of cookery of the more delicate kind, of household management, and the keeping of accounts (Besant, 1904, p. 6).

Besant prescribed a very narrow version of the scientific education in real sense of its term, just for preparing the girl for her future role as housewife and to make her an efficient homemaker. The wider notion of scientific education was not applicable to girls' education in Besant's scheme.

Another important part of the curriculum of girls' education, according to Besant was, artistic education such as needle work, music, playing veena, singing, embroidery, drawing, painting «so that leisure in later life may be pleasantly and adequately filled...and to add greatly to the charm of home» (Besant, 1904, p. 8). She opined,

The singing of stotras, to an accompaniment on the Vina, or other instrument, is a refining and delightful art in which the girls take the great pleasure and one which enables them to add greatly to the charm of home. Drawing and painting are arts in which some find delight, and their deft fingers readily learn exquisite embroidery and needle work of all kinds. Needless to say that all should learn sewing, darning and the cutting of such made garments as are used in their district. In all of these, the natural taste of the pupil should be the guide to the

selection of the art, though almost all, probably, will take part in singing (Besant, 1904, p. 8).

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. She opined,

In southern India, the girls are very fond of their own songs, performing often complicated exercises, in some of which patterns are woven and unwoven in coloured threads attached to a centre high overhead, the ends of the thread being held by the girls, whose evolutions make and unmake the pattern... Nothing is prettier than to see a group of girls moving gracefully to the sound of their own young voices, in and out, in mazy evolutions, with clapping of soft palms or clash of light playing sticks (Besant, 1904, p. 9).

Such an education, remarked Besant, would make the Indian girl «fit to be the “Lakshmi of the house”» (Besant, 1917, p. 115), making the Indian home «the centre of spirituality, the strength of the national religious life» (Besant, 1917, p. 115). 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» (Besant, 1917, p. 115). 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 home-maker 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.

## **6. 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.

As far as the education of girls was concerned, Besant's ideas mostly echoed the orthodox Hindu ideals and Victorian ideals of making a good wife and a good mother. She advocated for the limited aim of girls' education within the purview of Purdah (seclusion) norms. The girl child was the chief victim of customary child marriage but ironically Besant took no initiative to curb this practice, though in boys' school she had devised the rule of no admission of married boys.

The discussion in foregoing paragraphs clearly reveals the divisive and non-egalitarian nature of Besant's ideas on education. The masses, the oppressed castes and the girls had no claim in her scheme of modern education. Besant's educational ideas were elitist in character aimed at engendering the differences of class, caste, religion and gender in an already segregated Indian society.

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