THE IDEA AND WORKS ANNIE BESANT FOR THE ATTAINMENT OF DOMINION STATUS - A STUDY

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Mrs. Besant considered the foundation of the National Congress an attempt of the Indians to "imitate the representative system, and to lay before the Ruling power, by the voice of her representatives, her needs, her troubles, and her hopes." She blamed the Congress for "making time while the younger generation was getting impatient for a bolder national policy." Mrs. Besant criticized the elder Congress leaders, who, in her opinion, had not been taught how to love their country. In her articles on Self-Government in these papers, she announced her intention to lead a political movement in favour of Swaraj'.

Dominion status:

From the very beginning, Mrs. Besant stood for India's dominion status. In one of her lectures, she declared: "I stand for Dominion status because is makes India independent within her own territory, gives her control of the army and of her (potential) navy. Then she can take
independence whenever she wished to have it." In her opinion, Dominion status meant complete Self-Government from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin and from Dwaraka to Puri. She held independence to be India's inevitable fate and Home Rule or dominion status to be the first step to it.

The First World War that had broken out on 4 August 1914 had its impact on the Indian national movement. It indirectly encouraged the revolutionary movement in India and the Hindu-Muslim communities decided to join together to work for India's freedom. The Congress at its Madras session passed a resolution extending its full support to England. The War gave the moderates an opportunity to show their loyalty and faith to the British Empire. Many moderate leaders encouraged the people to join the army. Gandhi worked as a recruiting sergeant.

Mrs. Besant favoured the Allies and declared that they would win in the War. She urged others to support the War Loan and herself raised six hundred recruits for the defence force. When the War erupted, she called upon "all who are pledged to Universal Brotherhood, all Theosophists the world over, to stand for Right against Might, Law against Force, Freedom against Slavery, Brotherhood against Tyranny." Mrs. Besant asked how Britain was going to reward the heroism of Indian
soldiers who did a number of heroic deeds in the War. She herself found the answer that the reward could only be Self-Government for India.

In the latter part of the year 1914, she threw herself into the Congress movement and tried to infuse fresh enthusiasm among its members. Realizing that it was not possible to achieve the political goal without the return of the Extremists to the Congress fold, she paved the way for their reentry. In this attempt of compromise, many like S.Subramania Iyer helped her. Three weeks before the Congress met at Madras in 1914, Mrs.Besant went to Poona with Mr. Subbarao Pantalu and interviewed Tilak and Gokhale. She then sent Pantalu to Bombay for discussion with Feroz Shah Mehta, who refused to listen to him. Pantalu returned disappointed. Mr. Mehta and other Bombay moderates were against the idea of reunion and feared that if Tilak was allowed to enter the Congress, he would try and convert it into a militant body, which would bring the British down hard on it and prevent further developments in the direction of Constitutional reform. Gokhale withdrew his support to Tilak. In a confidential letter he explained his reason thus: "Mr. Tilak had openly avowed his intention of adopting the 'Boycott of Government' and the obstructionist methods of the Irish if he entered the Congress." On the basis of this letter, Bhupendra Nath Bose, the President of the
1914 Congress Session, rejected the proposal of the re-entry of extremists into the Congress. Mrs.Besant immediately wired to Tilak enquiring about it. She read the reply telegram from Tilak in the meeting, which said that he had never advocated boycott of Government. Bhupendra Nath Basu expressed his regret again and again for having charged Tilak with something he did not advocate. Tilak said that Gokhale had beaten him in the dark. He asked Gokhale to make his letter known to Bhupendra Nath. He even decided to take legal action against Gokhale, who stated that he had gathered from Tilak's talks with Subba Rao that Tilak's old policy was unchanged. She criticized them for 'desiring to lock the door and keeping others out.' Mehta, who was against the re-entry of Tilak, aimed to save the Congress from the influence of Tilak. "He stormed, he raged, he rallied at the idea of a compromise and condemned the compromise as mischievous." In the midst of the controversy, Gokhale died in 1915. Mrs.Besant failed in her attempt because of the negative attitude of the Bombay moderates.

On the question of Self-Government, Mrs.Besant spoke in the Congress Session in 1914 that "India asked for this before the War, India asks for it during the War. India will ask for it after the War; but not as a reward but as a right does she ask for it. On that there must be no
These words had their impact on Bhupendra Nath Basu, the President of the 1914 Congress Session, as reflected in his words: "The period of 'boons' was over. The period of claiming 'rights' was here." The meeting also accepted Mrs. Besant's idea that religion, education, morals and politics were all part of a great national movement. She said: "India is growing in the sense of her own dignity. She is not content to be any longer a child in the nursery of the Empire. She is showing the responsibility of the man in Europe. Give her the freedom of the man in India." She again declared that what India wanted was 'Purna Swaraj' and not higher powers and more employments. Influenced by her work, the Congress passed the resolution on Swaraj unanimously. In this meeting she even demanded that India should exclude imports from countries from which her people were excluded. Senior moderate leaders like Mehta, Gokhale and Malaviya did not attend the 1914 Madras Session. But their absence was compensated by the presence of Mrs. Besant, who appeared to be rising in Indian politics like a morning star.

In 1915 she had received her 'Marching Orders' from Bhagwan Sanat Kumar, who summoned her to Shamballa in the Gobi desert. The Guru said the following words: "You will have your time of trouble and
danger. I need not say, have no fear, but have no anxiety. Do not let opposition become angry. Be firm but not provocative. Press steadily; the preparation for the coming changes, and claim India's place in the Empire. Do not let it be stained by excess. Remember that you represent in the Outer World the Regent who is my Agent. My hand will be over you and my peace with you."\textsuperscript{12} These orders became her declared policy.

In 1915 Mrs. Besant started educational propaganda for Home Rule. She wrote in \textit{New India} that she used the words 'Home Rule' rather than Swaraj of Self-Government, because the British were more familiar with that word. She published more than two dozen Home Rule pamphlets and books including - \textit{India a Nation and How India Wrought for Freedom}. In the Foreword to the latter, she wrote that the time had come for a definite agitation for Home Rule.

Mrs. Besant announced her intention to start a political campaign in favour of Swaraj. This turned out to be the most important political work of Besant. At the Bombay Session of the Congress in 1915, she decided to launch a Home Rule league, as she felt the need for Home Rule League had arisen to be an active propagandist body as the Congress showed little activity between its annual sessions. The words 'Home
Rule' were chosen as a short public cry. This made it clear that the struggle was not against Great Britain, but for liberty within the Empire.\textsuperscript{13} In her opinion, 'Home Rule' did not mean democratic government. "It is not the form of government that makes Home Rule. It is that a nation is governing itself. A nation which by its own free vote, voted an autocracy, will still be a self-governing nation."\textsuperscript{14}

She prepared a clear plan of Self-Government for India and started her work from the village. In her opinion, every man and woman of twenty-one years of age must have his or her share of control in the administrative affairs.\textsuperscript{15} She was organized discussions, games, etc. In her opinion, education, industry, law and policy were absolutely necessary for India's welfare. She criticized the Government for its exploitation of the peasantry by the land revenue system, and also for exporting grain from India at times of scarcity and famine. In her opinion, the first duty of the Government was to save the people from starvation.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, she tried to inform the rulers of their duties towards the ruled. She ridiculed the use of English as the medium of instruction. In one of her speeches, she said that a feeble India would be a liability whereas a strong India would be an asset to the Empire.\textsuperscript{17} She requested the reformers to work for the abolition of the bureaucracy. In her article, 'What we are fighting for' she made clear that "Indian blood was not
being poured out in Europe in order to win freedom for others only."\textsuperscript{18} She warned the Indian masses that unless there was steady, firm and continuous agitation for self-government before the war was over, the freedom of India would be put off for generations.\textsuperscript{19} She also criticized Lord Chamberlain, the Secretary of State, for his ignorance and contempt for India. In her opinion, "he knew nothing and cared nothing." Through her organization and the press, she prepared the ground for Self-Government for India and requested the Indian press to get ready to wage the war for freedom.

**END NOTES**