

Annie Besant

Annie Besant was a British socialist, educationist and a women's rights activist known for her role in fostering the Home Rule Movement in India.

As an educationist, his contributions include being one of the founders of the Banaras Hindu University.

This article will give further details about Annie Besant within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

Background of Annie Besant.

Annie Besant was born Annie Wood to William Burton Persse Wood and Emily Roche Morris on 1 October 1847.

After completing her education, Annie married clergyman, Frank Besant at the age of 20, but her increasingly unconventional religious views led to their separation in 1873. She later became a prominent speaker for National Secular Society. Her time in the organisation led to their interest in the home rule of Ireland partly due to her mother being from Ireland

In 1890 Besant met Helena Blavatsky, and over the next few years her interest in theosophy grew, whilst her interest in secular matters waned. She became a member of the Theosophical Society and a prominent lecturer on the subject. As part of her theosophy-related work, she travelled to India. In 1898 she helped establish the Central Hindu School, later to be renamed as the Banaras Hindu University.

Role in the Indian Independence Movement

By 1902, Annie Besant had written that "India was not being ruled for the prosperity of its people but rather for the profits of its conquerors". She encouraged national consciousness, fought against social evils such as caste discrimination and child marriage while devoting time and energy for the advancement of Indian education.

Along with her social work, Besant took an active interest in politics when she joined the Indian National Congress (Founded on December 28, 1885). When she joined the Congress it was a debating body initially whose members met each year to consider which relations to pass on political issues. The resolutions demanded more of a say for middle-class Indians in the British Indian government. It had not yet developed into a permanent mass movement with a local organisation.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Britain asked the support of its colonies to fight against the Central Powers. Taking a cue from Irish nationalists, Besant declared that "India's

opportunity lay in Britain's need". In her capacity as editor of the New India newspaper, she attacked the colonial government of India and called for clear and decisive moves towards self-rule. But the colonial government refused to discuss such a possibility until the war ended

In 1916, Annie Besant Launched the All India Home Rule League along with Lokmanya Tilak, This was the first political party in India which demanded a total regime change. Unlike the Congress, the League worked all year round building a structure of local branches which could organise demonstrations, public meetings and agitations effectively. For her activities, the colonial government put her under house arrest. Both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League threatened to launch protest if she were not set free.

The government was forced to grant small yet significant concessions as a result. It was announced that the ultimate aim of British rule was Indian self-government and steps to make it a reality were promised to be undertaken. Annie Besant was freed in September 1917, welcomed by adoring crowds all over India and in December of that year, she became the president of the Indian National Congress (Formed on December 30, 1906) for a year.

After the war, a new leadership of the Indian National Congress emerged around Mahatma Gandhi – one of those who had written to demand Besant's release. Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's closest collaborator, had been educated by a theosophist tutor.

The new leadership was committed to action that was both militant and non-violent, but there were differences between them and Besant. 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.

Later Life and Legacy

Annie Besant continued to be a part of Theosophical Society until she became ill In 1931

She Besant died on 20 September 1933, at age 85, in Adyar, Madras Presidency.

She was survived by her daughter, Mabel. After her death, colleagues Jiddu Krishnamurti, Aldous Huxley and Rosalind Rajagopal, built the Happy Valley School in California, now renamed the Besant Hill School of Happy Valley in her honour.

In India, she is widely remembered for her role in the advancement of Indian education and for being a champion of Indian self-rule.