

## Dr. Besant and India's Religious Revival

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### FRIENDS:

I am greatly obliged to our President *pro term*. (Mr. A. P. Warrington) for his kind invitation to deliver one of the major lectures at this Convention, — the subject chosen for me being "Dr. Besant and India's Religious Revival". My obligation is the greater, because this affords an opportunity to pay my humble but loving homage to my spiritual Mother, to whom, I owe far more than words can express. If I may borrow a phrase from Mr. Jinarajadasa, thousands love Dr. Besant and bless her, because she has led them to the light. In common with these thousands, life for me also has become a nobler thing, because I have known her, and in trying in my feeble fashion to imitate her in her heroic sacrifices I too have sometimes had glimpses of the Divine.

At the same time, coming, as I do, after the two Theosophical stalwarts, who engaged our attention yesterday, I feel distinctly dwarfed and [Page 2] disconcerted. But, having taken up my cross, I have to carry it to the appointed end.

Men and women, in various walks of life, who have had the good fortune of being associated even remotely with Dr. Besant's manifold activities, bear unanimous testimony to her wonderful Karma-S'akti — her stupendous power for strenuous, sustained, intensive work. This has been her characteristic all through life. I remember Bernard Shaw saying in reference to her work in the Fabian Society in the eighties of the last century, that "any attempt to keep pace with her on the part of a mere man, generally wrecked the man". Another associate of hers Major Graham Pole, in speaking of her, says, "I know of no one who can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds of work well-done like Mrs. Besant". More than that. "The harder she worked, the more she could do". On one occasion, shortly after Mrs. Besant had actively joined in Indian politics, I happened to be travelling with Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya; the Pandit complaining of her break-neck speed, said that he and other Congress leaders of those days felt as though a cow-cart was harnessed to a motor car of tremendous vitality.

Inevitably, this prodigious Karma-S'akti flowed into many channels. Thus Dr. Besant's work had many facets and India's Religious Revival, about which I am to speak, was one of these facets. [Page 3]

To judge of this work in the correct perspective, it is necessary to take it in connection with what had already been attempted by the Theosophical Society in India.

The Society, as we all know, had been founded in New York on November 17th, 1875, by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, of hallowed memory, under the inspiration of two of the Masters. For this

purpose, Madame Blavatsky had been brought all the way to America — to be associated with the Colonel. In this connection let me quote, from the Mahatma letters, Master M's own words: "In casting about, we found in America the man to stand as leader — a man of great moral courage, unselfish, and having other good qualities. He was far from being the best but he was the best one available. With him, we associated a woman of most exceptional and wonderful endowments. Combined with them, she had strong personal defects; but just as she was, there was no second to her, living, fit for this work. We sent her to America, brought them together and — the trial began".

How near to failure the first efforts of the founders proved to be, appears from the following extract from Col. Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves* (Vol. I, p. 140.)

"So the membership dwindled by degrees until, at the end of a year or so, there survived the following: The form of a good organization, sound [Page 4] and strong in its platform; a clangorous notoriety; a few, more or less indolent, members; and an indestructible focus of vitality in the quenchless enthusiasm of the two friends, the Russian woman and the American man, who were in deadly earnest; who never for a moment harboured a doubt as to the existence of their Masters. the excellence of their delegated work, or the ultimate complete success that would crown it..... Many an evening after we had established our residential Headquarters, when our visitors had gone and H. P. B. and I stopped in the library-room for a parting smoke and chat, have we laughed to think how few we could count upon to stand by us through everything. ....The one thing we felt more and more as time went on was, that we two could absolutely depend upon each other for Theosophy, though the sky itself should crack; .....We used to speak of ourselves as the Theosophical Twins, and sometimes as a trinity; the chandelier hanging overhead making the third of the party! ...on the day when she and I were leaving our dismantled apartments in New York ...the last thing we did was to say, with mock seriousness, "Farewell, old Chandelier; silent, light-giving, unchanging friend and confidant!".

As I have said, the T. S. was founded in America but, at first, it was like a tiny seed planted in uncongenial soil. It did not flourish, in spite of the heroic efforts of the two founders, seconded by [Page 5] the ungrudging sacrifices of Mr. W. Q. Judge; so the founders (doubtless under inspiration) decided to transplant the tender shoot to Indian soil.

This was — if I may say so — quite in the fitness of things. For *ex oriente lux* — "light cometh from the East ". It was necessary that the hoary wisdom of the East should become available for the healing of the nations, or, as H. P. B. noted in her scrap-book as early as October, 1875, the Wisdom of India, her philosophy and achievements *must* be made known in Europe and America'. Was not that the *inner* purpose of the T. S. — to enable the white races to drink from the fountain of Aryan *Prajñā* ? That was why from the first the hearts of the two founders drew them towards the Orient. As one of them has put on record "our dreams were of India, our chief desire to get into relation with the Asiatic people". That desire was fulfilled when on the 17th December, 1878, Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott set sail for India, which they reached on the 16th February, 1879, and then a new era began for Theosophy and also for the Indian religions — particularly for Hinduism, the religion of the majority of the Indian people.

Col. Olcott has told us that, on their arrival, the two founders were enthusiastically welcomed and accepted by the Hindus, as champions of their ancient philosophies and exponents of their religions. From the first, they found themselves [Page 6] besieged by visitors, who were mostly Hindus, and were

also drawn into a rapidly widening correspondence, with Hindus principally, about Theosophical matters. This is not surprising, seeing that up to that time scarcely had anyone one good word to say about Hinduism or the Hindus. With the English-educated classes — with whom, as the result of their contact with the West, materialism and atheism were the order of the day; who were profoundly ignorant of the majesty and grandeur of their own religion; who (in the words of Master K. H., written in 1881), in their hourly increasing selfishness, never seemed to remember that they had a Mother, degraded, fallen down and trampled under the feet of all — *but still a Mother*; and whose self-satisfied complacency and supercilious pride in their meretricious B.A. and M.A. degrees, were good-naturedly railed at by the Colonel, who characterised them as "bad Aryans" and "mad Aryans" — to them — I say, Hinduism at that time appeared little better than a mass of superstitious practices and time-grown corruptions. Then again, not being the religion of the dominant race in India, it was the constant and convenient target for missionary ridicule. When therefore, " for the first time in the recollection of the oldest inhabitants, (I am quoting the exact words of Col. Olcott) a western man (and woman) upheld the majesty and sufficiency of the Eastern Scriptures and appealed to the sentiment of patriotic loyalty to the [Page 7] memory of their forefathers, to stand by their old religions, giving up nothing until after its worthlessness had been proved by impartial study", the effect produced on the Hindu mind was tremendous, and naturally Theosophy and its founders secured a warm place in the hearts of the Hindus. Thus were laid in broad outlines the foundations for India's religious revival, on which Mrs. Besant later raised her magnificent edifice.

Matters made fair progress during the next two years — 1881 and 1882. But it was only in 1883, that Theosophy became broad based on Indian soil. That was the record year in the early history of the T. S., when as the direct result of Colonel Olcott's remarkable Indian tour of 7 ,000 miles, about 43 new Lodges were established in almost all the principal centres of Hindustan. The warm and enthusiastic reception which the Colonel met with, wherever he went, the uniform good-will and cordiality which he received in every part of this sub-continent, the attentive and overflowing audiences which everywhere gathered to listen to his addresses, testified in unmistakable manner to the grateful appreciation on the part of the Hindus of the eminent services of Theosophy to the cause of the Hindu religion. One incident in this connection, remarkable in view of the orthodoxy of the party concerned, is recorded by the Colonel himself in his *Old Diary Leaves*. On the 9th March, 1883, he was invested with the sacred Brahmanical thread by [Page 8] Pandit Taranath Tarka-Vachaspati, (the most learned Brahmin-pandit of Bengal of his time) "to mark the sense of gratitude felt for him by the Hindus for the services in the revival of Sanskrit Literature and of religious interest among the Indian people". It is clear that the Hindu Community was for the time being caught up in a wave of enthusiasm. Theosophy got hold of the popular imagination, and there was, we are told, simply a rush for membership. In due course, however, followed the inevitable reaction, which was helped by what we call the 'Couloumb affair', but there was another important factor.

From the first, the partiality of the two founders for the Buddhist Religion, the Buddhistic garb in which they clothed Theosophy, by the adoption of Buddhist nomenclature and technical terms, and the rejection from their system of the idea of a personal God — the *Upāsya* of the devotee — had made the more orthodox sections of the Hindu Community to regard Theosophy as a covert form of Buddhism, and this idea received confirmation by the formal admission of the two founders into the Buddhist communion in Ceylon, and by the appearance of Mr. Sinnett's book which he entitled *Esoteric Buddhism*. Therefore, though grateful for the services rendered to their faith by Theosophy, the Hindus for the most part kept aloof.

May I in this connection draw attention to the letter of the great Adept called the Mahachohan, [Page 9]

written in 1881 ? In this letter, after insisting on the work to be done for the uplift of the world through brotherhood, He used these memorable words: "Oh! for the noble and the unselfish man to help us effectively *in India* in that divine task. All our knowledge, past and present, would not be sufficient to repay him". But why *India*, rather than any other part of the world ? We have the true explanation from the Right Rev. C. W. Leadbeater — " Our Society is world-wide, yet its root is in this sacred soil of India, the Motherland of the two adepts, who are jointly responsible for its foundation. Distracted though this country may be at the moment, forgetful though many of her sons may be of her glorious past and of her spiritual heritage, she still remains the land most suited to reflect the majesty of *Shamballa* — the spot of earth through which the light and life of higher planes may be most easily transmitted. The centres of commerce and material civilization (so-called) may be elsewhere, but this is still the focus of spiritual power, and an influence flows hence which, no other country in the World can give". These words of the Bishop are confirmed by our departed President, in her gracious message from beyond the gates of death — "India — my India which I love so deeply, my true Motherland and that of my Master — is She not also a Nation, are not her people a chosen people ? Chosen, yes ? but for what ? chosen to lead the world to spirituality, chosen to [Page 10] emphasise always the higher, the nobler, the less material aspect of life".

The Mahachohan's words were written in 1881, but, nearly twelve years were to elapse before the looked-for messenger appeared, in the person of Mrs. Annie Besant, to help the Masters effectively in their divine task in India.

It will be recalled that Mrs. Besant had joined the Theosophical Society on May 10th, 1889, and had very soon become "the most prominent personality in the English Theosophical movement". Madame Blavatsky who, as she said, had been waiting for her and who in 1890, with prophetic vision, spoke of Annie Besant, F. T. S., as " The *one* and THE ONLY ONE", passed away on the 8th May, 1891, and in October of the following year an invitation was sent to Mrs. Besant to come out to India for the Convention of that year to be held at the Adyar headquarters. Her reply was characteristic:

"Ere long I hope to stand face to face with you — I to whom India and the Indian people seem nearer than the nations to which by birth I belong. Born last time under Western skies, for work that needs to be done, I do not forget my true Motherland (India) ...When Karma opens the door, I will walk through it".

Karma proved propitious and opened the door next year, and Mrs. Besant walked through it, arriving in India in December, 1893. How she felt, [Page 11] when she first touched Indian ground has thus been placed by her on record.

"When I landed here for the first time I knew what love of country meant. For then the whole life came out into flower and taught me the fragrance of the land that is your own, the love of a crowd merely because they are fellow countrymen, and the feeling that at last you have come to the place you have loved and tried even blindly to serve, before yet you had trodden on its soil".

I can very well recall the occasion — to me a memorable one — when I first set my eyes on Mrs. Besant. That was at the Calcutta Town Hall, in January, 1894, when she stood up to speak for the first time to a Bengal audience — her subject was "Materialism undermined by Science". I was then a young man just

out of college, and, to use the words of Bernard Shaw, "at this time Annie Besant was the greatest orator in England, perhaps the greatest in Europe". The Bengali has an incurable partiality for oratory and I, in common with other Bengali youths, felt simply enthralled. What we then felt has been voiced by a Bengali, Sarojini Devi, then young like myself, in the following moving words of eloquence:

"To my young romantic fancy, this dazzling pilgrim from the West, with the glamour of her radiant presence and magic of her golden speech, seemed the living embodiment of all the brave [Page 12] and splendid women of old Greek and Norse and Gaelic legend, offering proud and joyous homage to the eternal genius of India".

It was soon after this that I joined the Theosophical Society.

As early as 1895, speaking on the Means of India's Regeneration, Mrs. Besant had said: "But these physical means of regeneration cannot succeed, unless they flow down, as the lowest means of the spiritual ideal; and the unifying of India must be founded on and permeated by a *spiritual* life recognised as the supreme good, as the highest goal. If India could be regenerated, if India could be purified, if India could be re-spiritualised, then the nation as a whole, with her spiritual faculties, her intellectual powers, her ideally-perfect social organisation, would stand forth in the eyes of the world as the priest-people of Humanity". Therefore, the re-spiritualisation of India, the rehabilitation of her "spiritual consciousness" — in a word, the revival of India's religions was the *first* task to which Mrs. Besant addressed herself. And here, her declared partiality for the Hindu form of the Wisdom-religion, her wonderful insight into the inner truths of Hinduism and her soul-enthraling exposition of its metaphysics, mysticism, symbology and sociology, throwing effulgent light on all its obscurities and intricacies, made her task easy of accomplishment. Mrs. Besant made it manifest [Page 13] once for all that while Theosophy was not to be identified with any particular form of the everlasting Brahmavidya, its leaven alone could make Hinduism live again in the hearts and minds of the Hindus.

To appreciate this, let us picture to ourselves for one moment. what was the condition of Hindu India before the advent of Theosophy. In broad outlines, it bears striking analogy to the condition of the Pagan world on the eve of the advent of Christianity. Empty ceremonial in the hands of a hidebound priesthood was stifling the life of true religion. While paying lip homage to the Vedas, the nation was actually living on the unhealthy pabulum of the Tantras, the *Upapurānas* and the compilations of scholiasts and commentators, neglecting the ambrosia of the Upanishads and the authentic Puranas and there were none to unravel the mysticism of the former or explain the symbolism of the latter. Naturally, the mind of the educated Hindu revolted against religion. The need of the hour in India was to take back the national mind to the pure waters of the early Scriptures, to expound their symbology and mysticism and to demonstrate how much Aryan thought was in harmony with modern scientific discoveries, thus bringing home to the educated Hindu how his ancestors had traversed the whole field of knowledge and how proud and glad he ought to be that he was of their blood and the [Page 14] heir of their wisdom. Theosophy had already begun this work and had proceeded up to a certain point when Mrs. Besant appeared in the field. She travelled over the length and breadth of India and in moving words drew attention to the transcendental metaphysics, the pure ethics and the superior sociological type (alas ! how degraded in later times) embodied in the ancient *Varnās'rama* of the Hindus. She was thus able to vindicate successfully the claim of Hinduism to be regarded as the eldest Sister of the living World-religions. She also succeeded in furnishing scientific corroborations of some of the apparently hopeless teachings in the Hindu books, such as, the divisibility of the atom, the homogeneous basis and the five

substates of matter, the correlation of the forces, etc.. She also pointed to facts in nature, on which were based a great many of the Hindu sacraments, ceremonials and practices, e.g., the S'rāddha, the Yajña, the mantra, temples, images, tirthas, etc.. She also illustrated and explained in her inimitable way, a large part of the allegory and symbology contained in the Purānas, such as the Bull of Mahādeva, the Garuda of Visnu, the lotus of creation, Nārāyana sleeping on the serpent, the churning of the Milky Ocean, etc.. She also threw illuminating light on some of the most knotty and intricate problems of Hindu Philosophy — such as the question of Monism versus Dualism, the absolute and [Page 15] relative — *i.e.*, the Nirguna and Saguna aspects of Brahman.

Nay more. By pointing out the heresy of separation and laying bare the hollowness of the goal of *Sva-vimukti*, aspired after by the spiritually-selfish among the Hindus, covetous only of their individual liberation, she roused in them an altruistic regard for the salvation of all; and by insisting on the fraternity of faiths and the identity in essentials of Hinduism and the other great religions, she taught the exclusive and self-sufficient Hindu, the much-needed lesson of a wide and noble tolerance of other creeds and faiths, proving that all religions were but variants of the same Ancient Wisdom — were not rivals but "sisters in the one family of the spirit". That is why in those two wonderful series, *The Four Great Religions*, and *The Religious Problem in India*, she drew attention to the beauties and sublimities, not of Hinduism alone but of all the other six great religions, — Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam, which in the inscrutable dispensation of Providence had found harbourage in India; and she pointed out how here and here alone could they find their unity as "the many faiths of one Holy Church" and their mighty consummation — to serve as the many-hued gems in the imperial diadem which the Almighty Jeweller was fashioning to place on the brow of the Humanity-to-be. And last but ,not least, by [Page 16] uncovering, as her predecessor H. P. B. had done, the ancient and narrow path of Discipleship, Dr. Besant assisted the earnest minded to find the lotus feet of the Masters of Wisdom and to attain the goal of the religious life.

Such, in brief outline, was Dr. Besant's work in achieving India's religious revival, which by this time is a fully accomplished fact, so that, as the result of Dr. Besant's work, an Indian, far from being ashamed is proud of his religion. Nay more. A Hindu is a better Hindu, a Buddhist a better Buddhist, a Parsi a better Zoroastrian, a Christian a better Christian and a Moslem a better Islami, and each has a truer and deeper appreciation of the truths of his own religion — because Dr. Besant lived and moved and worked in India. That work was indeed priceless and when we Indians try to assess its value, we feel simply overwhelmed. The poetess of India (Sarojini Devi) has recently voiced our verdict artistically in these words: "In token of love and homage to her, whose radiant spirit rekindled India's faith in her own ideals and destiny.." That puts the whole thing in a nutshell. Dr. Besant awakened Indians to a sense of their dignity, their heritage, their destiny. May we prove worthy of that noble heritage and live worthily to achieve that high destiny!

Dr. Besant realised, quite early in her Indian career, that if the religious revival for which she was working, was to bear lasting fruit, it must [Page 17] be given concrete embodiment in educational institutions, which would combine the ancient As'rama ideals of education with the best assimilable ideals of the West, whose motto would be *Vidya Dharmena s'obhate* — " Religion embellishes education", where the youths of the nation could "be brought up in an atmosphere of light and love", free from the three 'C' s of *cant*, *cram* and *cramp*. So she now turned to the educational field and in 1897, founded, with the help of some of her friends, the Central Hindu College as a corrective to the godless education then in vogue. How she wrought and laboured for the building up of this Central Hindu College and of the associated

Collegiate schools, is matter of history, and is needless to dilate upon here. But, as one of the foundation members of the Central Hindu College and as her co-trustee on its board of management, I love to recall how time and again she made good the budget deficits from her private funds and how when the *Fuente* legacy of over two lakhs of rupees fell in, Mrs. Besant turned it over to the Central Hindu College and how she transferred "Shānti-Kunja", her beloved Benares home, to that institution for a small consideration which she laid out on T. S. work.

In a few years, the new type of education which the C. H. C. had established, mainly under Dr. Besant's inspiration, achieved distinction, turning out, as it did, scholars by the hundred, [Page 18] sturdy in build, *Aryan* in character, keen of intellect, independent in outlook, and invincible in championing their own faith.

In this connection may I refer to the clear, concise and convincing religious text books — the *Sanātana Dharma Series*, issued by the C. H. C. under Dr. Besant's guidance which, for the first time, made the imparting of religious instruction possible on non-sectarian lines and which, once for all, fixed the model for this kind of literature.

By and by the cry for national education, under national control, went forth from one end of the country to the other and an insistent demand arose for the foundation of a Hindu University. The Government, which, of course, had the last word in the matter, propounded a poser: "Where is your College to serve as the nucleus of the proposed University?" Thereupon, greedy eyes fell on the Central Hindu College and strenuous efforts were made to capture it. Some of us tried to dissuade Mrs. Besant from giving it up. We argued: "We have built the Central Hindu College by our efforts and have worked these many years until it has become a splendid institution. Why should we give it up to the promoters of the Hindu University and allow them to reap where we have sown?" What was Mrs. Besant's answer? "We have built the Central Hindu College to serve the Indian nation and if the nation's welfare requires our extinction, we must [Page 19] not grudge the sacrifice" and she carried her point in spite of our opposition. So towards the end of 1914 we committed *Harikari* and the Hindu University came into being — Mrs. Besant effacing herself for the sake of the nation's well-being, and renouncing the Institution which she had built up with such tireless energy and such magnificent devotion.

After education, social reform in more intensive form (she had already adumbrated it in her *Ancient Ideals in Modern Life*) next claimed Mrs. Besant's attention, and in the moving series of lectures under the general caption *Wake Up India* in 1913, the subject reached its culmination. Here, also, the motive was definitely religious, because, as she has herself told us, Dr. Besant was moved to action by the orders of Rishi Agastya, the Regent Rishi of India.

In 1914, Mrs. Besant actively joined in Indian politics. The transformation was almost instantaneous, and what had before been an arid and unfruitful desert, was soon covered with green and soul-sustaining verdure. Here also her political programme had asocial and even more a religious background. She not only insisted on the preservation of India's ancient tradition and culture, but in insisting on India's rightful place in the British Commonwealth of Nations (which she loved to call the Indo-British Commonwealth), not as a dependent member but as an equal partner with England [Page 20] and the Dominions, she but carried out, as she has publicly declared, the 'marching orders' which she had received from the Great Being, who is the Head of the Occult Hierarchy, whom our Scriptures speak of as *Gurunāncha Guror-*

*Guru* ( the Guru of the Guru of the great Gurus). Here, she was acting (I am using the words of Dr. Subramanya Iyer, sometime Vice-President of our Society and Chief Justice of the Madras High Court) as "the enthusiastic champion of India's freedom, as none other than the chosen of the Unseen Powers who rule over the destinies of the World", and was putting the finishing touches to the glorious picture begun in 1893.

From that day in December, 1893, when Mrs. Besant arrived in India, she became, in the words of Bengal's grand old man, the late Ambica Charan Majumdar, sometime President of the Indian National Congress, "an Indian by adoption", and oh how truly did she love and serve her adopted mother! It is not for me, who have been her humble but devoted camp-follower for over thirty-eight years, to speak of her services to the Motherland. But, having been privileged to be somewhat closely associated, during that long period, with her activities in various fields of work, I can say, without a tinge of exaggeration, that no son or daughter born of the womb of Mother India has served her more faithfully and loyally, or has done more for her regeneration [Page 21] in the religious, educational, social and political spheres than Dr. Besant. When she arrived in this country, Mrs. Besant found India not actually dead but dying and decadent, and if at the present day we meet with patent signs of abounding life pulsating through her, veins, the credit (if she would care to take it) is undoubtedly Mrs. Besant's. Monuments in marble may be raised to her memory but she will live for future generations "not in monuments of stone but in the monumental progress she has helped to bring about", in the achievement of human brotherhood and — of India's religious revival.

What was the secret of Mrs. Besant's success in this and other fields of work ? Here we have her own answer: "Because very deep within me I am God; then I can do all things, because I am Divine". ... "Learn to trust the Divine in you. There lies your real strength. You *are* divine. You don 't want to look up to the skies to find the Divine; look into your own heart and the Divine is alive in you". One who can thus look into his own heart and find the Divine in its cavity — *Guhāhitam Gahvarestham Puraānam* — has already mastered the secret of Karma-yoga. Such an one can work, regardless of the fruits of action, from the impersonal point of view, in His name and for His sake. That is how Dr. Besant worked — as a Karma-yogin, as a practical mystic, as *nimittamātram* of the high [Page 22] powers, "as a channel for the outpouring of hidden forces of a higher Realm". She could thus always draw on the inexhaustible source of strength and energy — the power and potency of the Divine, as the tiny cloud in the spiral of the water spout, having effected its junction with the mighty ocean, is free of its unfathomable waters — and believing, as Dr. Besant did, in the good Law, which sweetly and mightily ordereth all things, she could safely leave things to *its* charge and go on.

On September 20th, this year, our leader suspended her physical work — for a time. But it may be predicted with confidence that the individual known to us as "Dr. Annie Besant" will, after the briefest rest, return to earth to take up the fight where she left it. Let us pray that the Great Ones, whose faithful servant she is, will arrange her quick rebirth in an Indian body, to lead the Indian Nation forward to victory in the not-remote future: "Return to us soon O Warrior ! to lead us once again".