

## Dr. Besant as a Comrade and a Leader

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Bishop Geo. S. Arundale and friends,

[Page 1] Let me at the outset thank you for the hospitality that you are extending in such full measure to one who is from the religious and the doctrinal point of view a stranger amongst you. It is true, as the Bishop has stated, that it was one of the great privileges of my life to have come into close contact with that world personality, Dr. Besant, and it was my great opportunity to have worked with her amidst good report and bad, in tribulation and success, towards the end for which she was working with a pre-vision which most of us are just beginning to realise. Nevertheless — this was one of the great traits of Dr. Besant — she and I agreed to differ, in regard to our intimate [Page 2] beliefs and our faiths. Dr. Besant and myself have had many, many talks on what to her was the most precious thing in this life and in the lives to come, her faith in the Masters and in Theosophy. But she was one of those rare persons who could not only see another's point of view but appreciate it, she demanded joint work in certain spheres and was content to live and let live in other spheres.

I propose today with your leave to deal with Dr. Besant as a Comrade and as a Leader. It is given to few of us in this world to turn out any formative work and such of us as have the misfortune not to be the progenitors of great ideas, not to be the protagonists of great movements, may remember those lines of consolation as well as hope:

Not on the vulgar mass called "work"  
Must sentence pass  
Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act  
All I could never be  
All men ignored in me  
This, was I worth to God,  
Whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Dr. Besant was one of those who had a clear conception of the goal she had in view. [Page 3] I have always made it a point to read her Autobiography periodically. It is a gospel of undaunted courage and unflinching integrity and like the confessions of St. Augustine and other great biographies in literature, that book narrates the struggle of a great soul, from darkness to light, according to its vision of light and darkness. Let me quote to you some verses which she herself has recorded as an epitome of her efforts in the earlier years of her life. This I have taken from her Autobiography.

For some may follow Truth from dawn to dark  
As a child follows by his mother's hand  
Knowing no fear, rejoicing all the way  
And unto some her face is as a star  
Set through an avenue of thorns and fires  
And still it draws them though the feet must bleed.

Dr. Besant was one who strove to find truth though her feet bled.

What does she mean in Indian politics ? Before her arrival on the scene politics was a gentle game. A few middle-aged persons, sitting in a hall, trying to speak for and on behalf of a few others, 50 or 60 in number, self-satisfied in [Page 4] themselves and convinced that wisdom did not lie in numbers, passed a few resolutions, which were duly chronicled in the newspapers, and in this fashion was public opinion formed and chronicled. Dr. Besant transformed all this. She made politics and the ideal of Home Rule and self-respect the mission of the village, of the taluq, of the district, of the country, and of the world. The masses were stirred by her for the first time in the history of Indian politics. Great men have followed her and they have stirred the masses too, in their way and whether along right lines or wrong it is not my purpose to relate to you just now. Perhaps even more vital and striking have been the more recent appeals made to the masses. But to her glory be it said that she was the first who made politics a live issue in the village, in the district and in the city. The idea of translating Indian politics from the cloister and the metropolis into the country was the idea of Dr. Besant.

In Indian journalism she made a new departure not only in the sense of producing vivid literature but in using it in the western way for propoganda, realising that the reiteration of ideas in different forms and in that intermission was the most potent means of [Page 5] creating and consolidating mass psychology and propogating new ideals.

Indian education was until she and her colleagues came on the scene, a thing largely controlled by foreign albeit benevolently patronising agencies. It consisted in the imparting of general information and in sedulous imitation of the life and thought of the so-called forward and progressive nations of the world. She changed all this. She insisted that education, and indeed that political, social and other efforts in India, should be Indian in outlook and led by Indians. She counted herself as an Indian, and when she strove to lead she led because she felt she was an Indian in the past and will be an Indian in the future births. But often to her came the thought which was expressed by her to her colleagues: " It is a pity I am born with a white body; I wish I were brown or black". She said so very often to me and to other colleagues. She regarded her outer vesture as one of her definite handicaps and held that if she had had a brown body she would have made a greater contribution to the life of India. And it was unfortunately true that when her political ideals had been overborne by non co-operation, a prejudice sprang up against her [Page 6] and she was regarded as a missionary of British Imperialism, whilst some English politicians of the die-hard variety dubbed her a traitor to the land of her birth. In the educational sphere, her work consisted in the arousing of self-respect which was nascent and dim. Some years ago it was the right thing to wear European dress, not because it was more convenient, but because it was the sign of progress, because our own dress was looked upon with what may be termed the inferiority complex. She hammered all such ideas out of the youth who came to the Benares College. Of course, as in every other direction the reaction has gone too far — in the direction of hatred of the foreign element — not the assimilation of it which she always advocated. The recovery of respect for India and Indian institutions

was the contribution of Dr. Besant, Colonel Olcott, Madame Blavatsky and all those colleagues of theirs who started the Theosophical Society; and all of us, whether Theosophists or not, must acknowledge with life-long gratitude the work that those pioneers of Theosophy did in conjunction with the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj in evoking, revoking, the self-respect and the dignity of India, of Indian life and of Indian thought. [Page 7]

What will people remember her by? Her monuments are and have been around us: the Adyar Headquarters, the buildings at Benares; the Y.M.I.A., the Y.M.I.A Parliament, *The Commonwealth* and the *New India* though they are no longer being published, to mention only a few. A person who contributed 999 out of 1,000 of the money required for the Gokhale Hall is now in danger of being forgotten even by those who go and make speeches in that hall. But to my mind the real memorial of Dr. Besant is in her living example of three qualities. Those three qualities are loyalty to colleagues and subordinates, tirelessness in body and mind, and absolute obliviousness to personal attacks and ignoring of difficulties if there was a cause to be served.

Let me exemplify what I have said. Dr. Besant first started on her political mission in 1913. In that year she went to England soon after the termination of the Krishnamurti case. Let me be pardoned, if speaking on this occasion refer to that case, because it is from that conflict that I began to understand and appreciate that great soul. The Krishnamurti case went on. I had assiduously cross examined Dr. Subramania Aiyar, Bishop Leadbeater, Dr. Besant, Dr. Arundale, and others, I fancied [Page 8] I had made a great hit, and that I had brought about the collapse of Theosophy — a young man in a hurry generally thinks so. I temporarily succeeded so far as the Indian Courts were concerned,— I may tell you now that my clients were many Americans and only one Indian and the only chronicle of that case is an American publication which is now out of print — my clients were insistent that I should move for the committal of Dr. Besant to prison for Contempt of Court. As a matter of fact she had been guilty of a series of Contempts of Courts. When I say that I may remind you that there was no other person that I have come across who was more respectful of Courts, Judicature, and the Law than Dr. Besant. But when the law made an ass of itself she thought it was her duty to commit Contempt and suffer for the committal of contempt. I was asked to move for the committal of Dr. Besant but I declined to do so, as I believed that it was not my function to be vindictive.

She called on me one day and said: “You and I have fought hard. There is a bigger fight ahead in which we can and should co-operate. There is great work for all of us to do in the future; will you join hands with me in that work? That [Page 9] was when the application for contempt was pending. The news of that visit of hers quickly spread amongst the clients and I was not again asked to move for Contempt of Court. I am mentioning this not for the purpose of self-glorification about the part I played but to tell you that animosities, opposition, did not matter to her. If she wanted work to be done and if she thought that someone could contribute however little to that work, she did not care for convention, she stepped forward and obtained his co-operation without standing on dignity.

It was in 1913 when all this happened that she went to England and preached the doctrines of Home Rule for India. It may be remarked in this connection that though we are all talking of Federation as the latest solution — each one of us excepting in moments of scepticism is an ardent votary of Federation — in 1913 Dr. Besant delivered a lecture on Federation and on the federal idea of government. In 1914 on the 14th July, on the anniversary day of the fall of Bastille she founded the *New India* newspaper. From that moment her methods which were tempestuous, impetuous, passionate were not to the liking of the

staid and older members of [Page 10] Congress. They were unaccustomed to tempests and they were frankly hostile. There are one or two still living who belonged to that group; some are dead. I have had talks with Mr. Gokhale on this matter and he did not join hands with Dr. Besant till after the struggle had begun; and only on account of his passionate faith in India and his hope and trust that something would come out of her work to rejuvenate and make India a factor in the world that he began to work with her, although at first he was very nervous of her entry into Indian politics. As soon as Gandhiji returned from South Africa he told him not to enter politics for a certain limited period, because he thought the example of South Africa, passive resistance would be dangerous to India. This happened in 1914. Dr. Besant, with her characteristic and phenomenal energy, carried on her work day after day and hour after hour, meeting representative leaders, trying to convince them and at last brought them over to her side.

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, an old friend of mine, was hostile to Dr. Besant, to start with. She would not, at first meet Dr. Besant, and would not co-operate with her. For many years they did not see eye to eye, with each other. [Page 11] Dr. Besant thought however that Mrs. Naidu, was a typical woman of India and that she ought not to be lost to the Indian cause, and in the end she won her over. Thus it was that the other day, speaking at Bombay, Mrs. Naidu proffered what was one of the most fervent tributes to the work and the contribution of Dr. Besant in the field of Indian politics.

Mr. Tilak, though a child of the storm like Dr. Besant, loved to work somewhat behind the scenes. He loved what may be called the occult side of Indian politics. He was rather worried about Dr. Besant. He however overcame that feeling and in 1919 when they both went to England, they spoke with one voice.

In 1914 *New India* was started. In 1915 the Home Rule League was founded. She regarded herself as the leader of the youth of the country and many older politicians found that they were out of the picture because they found, it difficult to cope with the work of the League and its new ideas. People had to address gatherings not of fifty people, but of five thousand. It is a strain not only on the voice of the polite and well-bred middle-aged politicians but on the temper and on the nerves. Dr. Besant knew no rest and did not spare herself in her campaign. [Page 12] But that movement would not have seen its real culmination without, that suffering which is the badge of all great movements. The internment had to be undergone. In fact from 1915 various warnings were given; the Government got worried. The Government of Madras proceeded against the newspaper. It was my great privilege to stand by her in those days and defend her in the Courts. I uniformly failed but those failures were, taken as successes because even the judges had realised that Dr. Besant failed because of the state of the law and not because the articles in *New India* were really seditious. The internment was shared by Mr. Wadia and Mr. Arundale, and it was one of the culminating points in Indian politics. Mr. Montagu came at this juncture on his mission of peace and conciliation. Dr. Besant was willing to suffer if thereby her cause could be more adequately published abroad and understood. The whole time she wrote in order to be interned; she spoke in order to be interned; she put all her energies into the task of suffering for the sake of the country. One day she said "I am a foreigner and unless I suffer people would not believe that I am not a hidden instrument of imperialism, that [Page 13] I am not the mere agent of the British Government". Mr. Montagu had vision and she was released after the decision was made to start a new constitution, which she had helped to make inevitable.

I want all of you here to recall to your minds those scenes of enthusiasm which marked the return of Dr. Besant and her colleagues from the internment. The masses were stirred anew. Her release was regarded as a triumph of agitation and her reception by the masses was a sign that they knew that their

influence, that their energies, that their efforts could be successful, provided it was continued enough, strenuous enough and intense enough. It was essentially the success of the mass movement which demanded freedom for the people. Partly on account of that awakening and partly on account of the disturbed conditions in Europe, the British Government felt it was time to act. And so Mr. Montagu came; and the Montagu - Chelmsford reform was initiated. Dr. Besant knew when to stop and when to go on. Mr. Montagu was also an Eastern, with really an Eastern soul although a Western in body; he loved India, he worked for India, he threw away his career for the sake of India. Dr. Besant realised his sincerity [Page 14] and his anxiety to help India and determined to co-operate with him. I may tell you that when the new dispensation came serious discussions took place, and long and earnest were the talks as to whether the acceptance of office by her colleagues would be beneficial to the national movement; whether those who accepted it would not be put down as job-seekers and office-hunters. It was also discussed as to whether acceptance of office may not see the end of the movement which she had started. But she said: "In India till recently the idea has been that all the strength of the people lies only in attack; constructive work must be shown and demonstrated so that it may not be possible for the Englishman to declare that Indians are glib talkers and facile debaters, but when it comes to doing something they have to rely on non-Indians". From that moment Dr. Besant tried to co-operate. She did not always pursue that path, because after the disappearance of Mr. Montagu from the India Office things became worse. So her political policy diverged again from the paths of enthusiastic collaboration and she became a critic again. Lastly came those days when on account of increasing infirmities she was not able to take an active part in political or [Page 15] public life. But those of us who were privileged to go near her, who worked with her, knew that not a word was spoken excepting for the benefit and for the glorification of India, not a thought passed through her excepting in the cause of India, not an aspiration was held excepting for the greatness of India; she dreamt of India always, and she often stated that a message had come to her that India was bound to lead the nations of the world sooner or later, and the sooner if Indians become worthy of the heritage, and labour hard to preserve and augment it.

That is a resume of some aspects of her political life. But great as it is in achievement and purpose it is only a small part of what she did. I would like here to dwell upon a scene which I saw when the staff of *New India* was being disbanded, the *New India* which she created and loved. If you had seen the tears of the foreman, of the compositors, of the clerks and the lowest menial workmen, you would have realised that in her great soul there was space enough not only for great thoughts and great deeds but for those acts of small kindnesses which link man and man in a chain of sympathy and fellow feeling, you would have felt that here was a person who [Page 16] was human right through, and who that has read her history will doubt that ?

She was Irish and she was essentially an aristocrat who nevertheless had profound human sympathies. She was impetuous and full of faith, with an yearning for truth wherever she saw it. I would recall to your minds the revelation that came to her when she passed into a vacant church. The idea suddenly occurred to her that she was a born speaker, she preached in that vacant church and she found her motive as one of the great orators of the world. She cut herself loose from marriage bonds because she did not believe in the conventional binding of unpleasant facts. She read the New Testament over and over again; she tried to reconstruct what had taken place. She read the four Gospels and found they differed in detail; some differed more than in detail and her faith in a dogmatic religion failed. She did not hesitate to break away from Christianity and later came her work with Charles Bradlaugh, the great rebel who nevertheless championed law or order, then she made her contribution to the Labour Movement in England and for the Fabians. Later still Stead asked her to review *The Secret Doctrine* of Mme. Blavatsky, she believed that the authentic revelation [Page 17] came to her. Then she felt she must go to

India, that her work lay in India and that in Hinduism was her ultimate refuge. Through all these outer changes of environment and doctrine she was intrinsically and greatly sincere and true to her inner self and this unflinching and uncompromising pursuit of truth as she saw it was one of her dominating traits.

But throughout all her life there was another great quality that she displayed, namely her loyalty and sense of Comradeship. I have made a list of the persons who have worked with her from early days until the end. The first of them was Roberts, the poor man's lawyer who stood by her in the Manchester trial; the next were Mr. and Mrs. Scott who in the days of her agnosticism helped her to find herself; then came Charles Bradlaugh, that fierce, dynamic and honest personality; then came Aveling who asked her in the midst of the tribulations of her domestic struggle, when she was fighting the case about her children, to matriculate herself in the London University and study Science as a relief and relaxation. Then she met Burrows who evoked in her the spirit to serve the down-trodden, the dockers and match-girls. [Page 18] Then began her collaboration with Bernard Shaw, the Webbs, and the Fabians, Labouchere, Hyndman and Stead. In that great procession of comrades came Madame Blavatsky, A. P. Sinnett, Colonel Olcott, Bishop Leadbeater, Dr. Arundale, Jinarajadasa and Krishnamurti, and those colleagues in Benares, Chakravarti, Upendranath Basu and Babu Bhagavan Das who helped her to found the Central Hindu College that was later to become the Benares Hindu University; Sir Subramania Aiyar and a number of others were also her colleagues who stood by her till the end; and my humble self when the Home Rule League was founded; there were also Messrs. Wadia, Shiva Rao, Ranganatha Mudaliar, and Manjeri Rama Aiyar, Jamnadas Dwarakadas, Miss Arundale, Mrs. Jinarajadasa and numberless others who shared her enthusiasm and worked whole-heartedly for a great and noble soul whose faculty for encouragement and appreciation was boundless and from whom nothing was concealed and to whom everything was given.

What a glorious study of Comradeship, what a story of co-ordinated effort, what a story of linked strength, the life of Dr. Besant has been. Perhaps greater than her individual work, great and notable as it is, was in [Page 19] her faculty, in her capacity, for evoking conjoint work, that capacity of the true leader not to be an aloof commander, but to become a colleague and coadjutor. Joined to this was a pitiful tenderness for the weak, and strong affection which were showered not only on her friends but on her dependents, on her chauffeur, Peter, and her attendant, Lakshman.

And so, my friends, in a brief sketch I have striven to indicate however desultorily her greatness as a leader, as a Colleague and Comrade and as one who strove for the truth. She stood for unity and joint work and let me conclude by quoting a verse from the Upanishads:

सह नावतु सह नौ मुनक्तु  
सह वीर्यं कर्वावहै  
तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु  
मा विद्विषावहै

" Let us work together, let us realise our object together, let us conquer together, and let us not hate each

other."

That is the lesson which India of today has to learn. Let us conquer but not by hatred, let us conquer by love but let us be fighters all the time.