Annie Besant: The Brilliant Outsider 1847-1933

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Britons must give up the idea that India is a possession to be exploited for their own benefit, and must see her as a friend, an equal, a Self-Governing Dominion within the Empire, a Nation like themselves, a willing partner in the Empire, but not a dependent." (Congress Presidential Address given December 26, 1917.)

Annie Besant was not the first Briton to hold a prominent position in Indian nationalist politics, but she was the last to rise to its leadership. Her unique assets of personality, position and race made her the ideal person to transform the Indian National Congress from a complacent organization to an energetic one during the years of the first World War. But her essentially conservative position, belied by her strident rhetoric, made it impossible for her to retain a leadership role for long.

Annie Wood was born October 1, 1847 in London; she was privately educated and early on expressed a deep interest in religion and spirituality. She was married in 1866 to the reverend Frank Besant, and she soon bore two children. In 1871 the serious illness of her daughter provoked a crisis of faith, and by 1875 she was separated from her husband and lecturing on atheism. This was the beginning of nearly twenty years' involvement in the major social issues of the day. As George Lansbury, the Labour MP who would later introduce her Commonwealth of India Bill into Parliament, said of her:

To write fully about her activities in the social and political life of Britain would be to write almost in full the story of social and political change from 1874 to the time she left for India. There was no movement in which she did not take an active and prominent part...²

During the period 1874-1893 Besant worked for family planning, women's suffrage, trade unionism, Irish Home Rule, etc.; she wrote England, India and Afghanistan, an early attack on British imperialism, in 1879. In 1885 she joined the evolutionary socialist Fabian Society of George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs and began to develop the incomparable speaking style for which she was greatly admired. Shaw later observed that "at this time Mrs. Besant was the greatest orator in England, and possibly in Europe...I have never heard her excelled."³

In 1889 Annie Besant discovered theosophy and found a spiritual home. Theosophy had been established in 1875 by two Americans, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott,

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² Quoted in C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Annie Besant (Delhi: Government of India Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1963), 33-34.

...to found a nucleus of universal brotherhood, (2) to promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religion and sciences, and (3) to investigate the unfamiliar laws of nature and the latent faculties of man.4

Steeped though it was in metaphysics, occultism, clairvoyance and the belief in reincarnation, theosophy also claimed the primacy of Eastern spiritual understanding.

The headquarters of the World Theosophical Society was moved to Adyar, a suburb of Madras, in 1891. Besant moved to India and took up residence in Benares in 1893, with a mission to show "the insufficiency of materialism as an answer to the problems of life, and the immense superiority of Hinduism as a philosophy."5 In its emphasis on India's spiritual heritage, theosophy paralleled the growth of Hindu nationalism during the nineteenth century, particularly the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj movements. But whereas those organizations were strongest among Hindus alienated by the British Raj, or in areas where Hindus were a minority (Bengal and Punjab),6 theosophy attracted the new Anglophile class of Indians from all over the country.

The crowds of the so-called English-educated class were ...contemptuous of the past and hence hopeless for the future... De-spiritualism had brought about national degeneracy. There was no activity of national life, no pulsing of the national heart... So [Theosophists] began with the revival of religion; they pointed out the value of Hindu teachings, ... proclaimed the value of Indian thought and the priceless heritage of the Indian people...7

For the next twenty years Besant immersed herself in the religious life of the nation, becoming, in her words, "Hindu in all save the outer ceremonies for which my white skin disqualifies me."8 In 1894 she translated the Bhagavad Gita9 into English; in 1898 she founded the Central Hindu College at Benares, an "institution in which Hinduism [was] an integral part of

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4 Aiyar, 51.
5 Annie Besant, India, Bond or Free? (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, Ltd., 1926), 27.
6 The Brahmo Samaj, founded in the 1820s, sought to reconcile Hindu traditions to western modernity. Its stronghold was in Bengal, where many Hindus had converted to Christianity. The Arya Samaj, was a more 'reactionary' organization, was founded in 1875 to revive Vedic theology and rituals. From its base in Punjab it attacked both Christianity and Islam, as well as orthodox Hinduism, which it accused of adopting non-Vedic customs.
9 The "Song of the Blessed One", a Sanskrit poem containing all the important themes of Hindu philosophy, and considered on of its major texts. It is interesting to note that while Annie Besant read Sanskrit, she spoke no modern Indian languages. Gandhi, on the other hand, did not know Sanskrit, and first read the Gita in (another) English translation.
the education given." She was made president of the Theosophical Society in 1908, a position she held until her death in 1933, and relocated to Adyar.

For the remainder of her life, Besant would fuse her political and religious interests. This was often to cause problems, as when her adamantly pro-Allied stance during World War I alienated many German theosophists. In 1922 she stated:

If I am to forecast the 'Future of Indian Politics', I must make it clear that I believe that the destinies of Nations are planned by the Occult Hierarchy which rules the world, and are not merely the struggles, defeats and victories, directed by Rulers, Generals, Admirals, Statesmen and Parliaments.

Similarly, in 1917, when she was offered early release from internment "to resume religious work...", the offer was denied. Mrs. Besant said in her letter that she could not discriminate between her "religious and political activities."

Prior to World War I, Besant generally confined her activities to social and educational reform, proselytizing for Theosophy, and lecturing in Europe and America. Nonetheless, her growing attacks on the Government, particularly for its failures in education, brought her notoriety and warnings from the authorities.

Annie Besant's critique of British imperialism was extensive, including the economic, educational, religious and political aspects of the regime. She naturally excoriated the work of Christian missionaries, who were subsidized by the Government. The educational system was miserable, particularly when compared with that of rapidly industrializing Japan; in 1915 Britain was educating only five percent of the Indian population. Moreover, "the education given...is planned on foreign models, and its object is to serve foreign rather than native ends, to make docile Government servants rather than patriotic citizens." Besant's analysis of the economic effects of colonization was widely shared. Although Indian nationalists tended to focus on the loss of indigenous industries, she put equal weight on the enormous cost borne by Indians for a bureaucracy designed to oppress them. Crushing taxation was used to pay for the repressive machinery of government.

The British land registration system converted traditional communal landholding into landlord-tenant relationships, and forced the peasantry into debt-peonage. Tariff policy had destroyed Indian handicrafts and prevented the development of industry, reducing India to an open market for British manufacturing surplus. The Raj had failed to maintain and expand the

10 Besant, India: A Nation, 61.
12 Times (London), 22 September 1917, 5.
13 Besant, The Future, 188.
infrastructure, allowing the deterioration of irrigation and sanitation systems, and the resultant increases in famine and disease. Even that greatest triumph of the British in India, the Indian Railway system, was, she claimed, designed and built to facilitate the movement of troops, not to modernize India's economy.14 In short, British economic policy in India was an abject failure. "The word 'drain' is sometimes objected to, as connoting that the burden of the white man on India tends to exhaust her resources. That is exactly what it is intended to connote."15

A great deal of the fault, in Besant's opinion, lay in the fact that the Raj tended to pass over skilled Indians in favor of European 'experts'. The racist attitude of the Government—in education, in public accommodations, in official appointments—angered her.

To rebut official pronouncements that India was not prepared for self-government, Besant was fond of pointing to India's five thousand years of continuous civilization:

"The argument that Democracy is foreign to India cannot be alleged by any well-informed person...Historians recognize the fact that Democratic Institutions are essentially Aryan, and spread from India to Europe with the immigration of Aryan peoples."16

She believed that the cure for India's problems was the revival of the nation's traditional forms of governance, under Indian supervision, but within the protective cloak of the British Commonwealth system. "The question is not how to train Indians to copy British institutions but how to restore the Indian institutions which the British have destroyed."17

To that end Besant developed an elaborate plan for combining the revived panchayat, the traditional Indian village council, with British parliamentary democracy. The plan called for a tiered hierarchy of government, with correspondingly tiered electorates.18 With this admittedly elitist system, Besant hoped to keep control of the most basic government functions at the local

18 The most basic level was the panchayat, or ward council in towns and cities, elected by universal suffrage and responsible for primary schools, local infrastructure (roads, irrigation, lighting, etc.), credit banks for farmers, and supervision of markets. Next came the taluk (sub-district) boards, covering rural areas and municipalities below a specified size. These were to be elected by men and women over the age of 25 with primary school education; they were to have authority over secondary education, infrastructure within the district, and agricultural cooperatives. The District Boards, the next tier, were to be elected by citizens over 30 who had completed secondary school, and were to oversee roads and railways, local colleges, and the collection and distribution of local taxes. The Provincial Parliaments, with responsibility for the levying of taxes, the division of duties among the lower councils, and the links with national government, would be chosen by the members of the District Boards, and by college graduates over the age of 35. The Provincial Parliaments would elect the National Government, with its authority over "national affairs, army, navy, railway, post, customs, etc." Finally, the National Government would appoint representatives to the "Parliament of the Empire". Besant, *India: A Nation*, 89-91.
level firmly in the control of the citizenry and free from the bureaucracy of the state and central
governments which would be led by the English-educated classes.19

By the beginning of World War I, Besant believed that world affairs were so transformed
as to make self-government for India both necessary and feasible. Japan's modernization and her
stunning defeat of Russia in Manchuria provided an example of successful resistance to
imperialism. The Parliamentary debates over Irish Home Rule spurred Indian nationalists to
comparisons. European (especially German) belligerence and militarism during the early years of
the century caused a "loss of belief in the superiority of the white races."20

Finally there was the Great War itself. Even Britain recognized the impact of World War I
rhetoric upon her colonial subjects:

The mere fact that the Allies were avowedly fighting in defence of the rights of small and
weak nations against large and strong ones; the frequent references by Allied statesmen to
such terms as democracy and self determination; the strong world movement towards
government by popular opinion--all these combined to raise vague hopes and to stimulate
discontent with the existing polity in India.21

Annie Besant, who often quoted Wilson on the subject of self-determination, made an even more
pointed analogy:

Asquith spoke of what England would feel if Germans filled her highest offices, controlled
her policy, levied her taxes, made her laws; it would be inconceivable, he cried, and
intolerable. India listened and murmured to herself: 'But that is exactly my condition...'.22

The Indian National Congress, the foremost nationalist organization of the day, was not
prepared to take up the gauntlet. Founded in 1885 to foster Indo-British cooperation, the Congress
did not begin to demand self-government until 1905, and then only in the vaguest terms. In fact,
they were pushed into it by the rising Hindu nationalists, labelled 'Extremists', led by Balwantrao
Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920). Opposed to the ineffective constitutional methods of the Congress
"Moderates", Tilak advocated "passive resistance", the boycotting of government institutions, and
believed violence might be necessary to achieve swaraj (self-rule).

At the 1907 meeting in Surat, the Extremists were excluded from the Congress, and shortly
thereafter Tilak was imprisoned by the Government for sedition. The Congress Moderates then

19 Besant's panchayat plan was expanded and modified by Gandhi, and incorporated into the Indian
Constitution. Unfortunately, in practice, power has resided at the state and national levels. The dominant
slogan of the recent elections was "Panchayat raj", a demand that control be returned to the village council.

20 Besant, Congress Presidential Address, 323-324.

21 Parliament, "Statement Exhibiting the Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India during the
Year 1917-1918", Sessional Papers (Commons), 1919, East India, 1919, p. 30.

22 Besant, The Future, 93.
continued, in one historian's words, "[meeting] once a year during Christmas week, passing resolutions and then [going] to sleep until next December...the moral superiority and physical strength of the British Raj remained undisputed."  

In 1914 Annie Besant entered Indian politics, joining the Indian National Congress to attempt the reconciliation of the Moderates and the recently released Tilak who had toned down his rhetoric. The failure of this overture convinced her that an alternate organization was needed to harness and direct the rising nationalism in India.

It was because Congress showed little activity between its annual sessions that the need for a Home Rule League had arisen. The words 'Home Rule' were chosen as a short, popular cry, marking the fact that the struggle was not against Great Britain, but for Liberty within the Empire.

Inspired by the Irish example, she and Tilak formed two Home Rule Leagues, he in April 1916, she in September, but they cooperated between 1916 and 1919, becoming members of each other's organizations. During the period 1916-1918, Tilak was Besant's only serious rival for power.

Besant had many assets for political leadership: superb speaking skills and renown as a public speaker; liaisons with activists in Britain; control of the Theosophist movement and its numerous branches, both within India and world-wide; editorial control of three publications (New India, a daily, and Commonwealth and The Theosophist, both monthlies); and access to the finances of the Theosophical Society and its members. The fact that she was white was also an asset, in that the Government was more circumspect in its attempts to rein her in.

When Mrs. Besant jumped from Theosophy...to the Congress ...she brought new ideas, new talents, new resources, and altogether a new method of organization and a new outlook into the field of the Congress. She was already a great world character and had millions of followers in the East and the West, in the New Hemisphere as well as the Old. No wonder then that, with this mighty following and with her inexhaustible energy, she gave a new life to Indian politics.

The Home Rule Leagues used the methods of agitation that had served her so well in earlier political movements: nation-wide organization, massive public meetings, and widespread pamphleteering. By the end of 1917, the combined membership of the Home Rule Leagues was 60,000. Their support was particularly strong among students, Hindu nationalists, and the English-educated professional classes, but some attempts were made to reach the masses:

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While Mrs. Besant and her lieutenants pay particular attention to the student class, there are indications of the initiation of a campaign for village work based mainly on the distribution of vernacular pamphlets... *New India*...owing largely to its cheapness...is giving the Home Rule movement a marked impetus among English-knowing people of all classes...26

The annual Congress meeting at Lucknow in December 1916 saw the readmittance of the Extremists and the beginning of a brief period of cooperation between the Hindu-dominated Congress and the Muslim League.27 The Congress-League Scheme, adopted at Lucknow, demanded in forthright terms "that in the reconstruction of the Empire, India shall be lifted towards Self-Government."28

Many Moderates, including Gandhi, argued that it was disloyal to demand Home Rule while England was at war. Besant countered that, while she accepted that no action would be taken until after the War, constant agitation would force the Government to make irrevocable promises of reform.

...it is said that you ought not to embarrass the British Government by raising such a question as this in the middle of the War...We are only taking the advice of Mr. Bonar Law, who advised the Dominions to strike the iron while it was red hot. After the reconstruction of the Empire, the iron will be cold...29

Meanwhile, her activities posed a peculiar dilemma for the Government. "The Home Rule Leagues were involved in activities which defied categorization in the terms of the past--they were neither pure politics in the old Congress sense, nor revolution..."30 While several Provincial Governors excluded her from their domains, and there were calls for her detention or deportation (problematic in a period of submarine warfare), the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, remained unconvinced that her actions constituted sedition. Finally, it was agreed that "in the midst of a great war it [was] plainly impossible to permit the raising of popular excitement by the employment of violent language directed against the existing regime",31 and on June 16, 1917, Annie Besant

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27 The Muslim League was founded in 1906 as a counter-balance to rising Hindu-nationalism, particularly in areas where Muslims were a majority. The Minto-Morley reforms of 1909 had granted Muslims separate electorates to the provincial Indian Legislative Councils (which had an advisory role only). World War I had a distinctive effect upon India's Islamic community, as they saw Britain breaking up the Ottoman Empire. The result was a pan-Islamic movement in India which allied itself to the Home Rule Leagues as a means of forcing an end to the Raj.

28 Sitaramayya, 623.

29 Annie Besant, Speech on Self-Government Resolution in the Lucknow Congress, in *Speeches*, 246.


31 Parliament, p. 35.
and two of her colleagues were ordered interned by the Governor of Madras. Besant had a different explanation for her arrest:

My real crime is that I have awakened the national self-respect, which was asleep, and have made thousands of educated men feel that to be content with being 'a subject race' is a dishonor...32

The reaction to her internment was enormous. Demonstrations broke out all over the country. Gandhi circulated his 'Monster Petition' protesting the internment and demanding Home Rule; he eventually collected over 700,000 signatures.33 A campaign of boycotts and passive resistance was proposed but Besant was released before it could be put into action. In England, pointed questions were asked in the House of Commons.34 Many English and American periodicals were critical of the action; the New Statesman claimed that "Mrs. Besant has not committed any crime...[she] is under suspicion [only] because she has asked for Home Rule for India."35 Edwin Montagu, the newly appointed Secretary of State for India, later commented,

I particularly liked that Shiva who cut his wife into fifty-two pieces, only to discover that he had fifty-two wives! This is really what happened to the Government of India when it interned Mrs. Besant.36

The British Government, which had been debating reform for over a year, hurriedly issued the Montagu Declaration of August 20, 1917. The Declaration carefully promised "the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of Responsible Government in India",37 and Montagu embarked on a fact-finding tour of the country. Besant was released on September 18 and returned in a triumphal procession to Adyar.

In December 1917, at its annual meeting at Calcutta, Annie Besant was unanimously elected President of the Indian National Congress "out of gratitude for her services to the nation."38 Her Presidential Address included an exhaustive analysis of the conditions leading to the Home Rule Movement, and concluded with a demand for immediate reforms leading to self-

32 Annie Besant, "Farewell to My Brothers and Sisters in India", June 1917, in Speeches, 287-288.
34 Times, 27 June 1917, 11.
35 New Statesman, 23 June 1917, 276.
37 But note the use of the term "Responsible Government", not self-government, and the absence of a definitive timetable.
38 Hindu (Madras), 21 September 1933, 13.
With regard to our new objective, I suggest that we should ask the British Government to pass a Bill during 1918 establishing Self-Government in India on lines resembling those of the Commonwealth of Australia, the act to come into force at a date to be laid down therein, preferably 1923, at the latest 1928, the intermediate five or ten years being occupied with the transference of the Government from British to Indian hands, maintaining the British tie as in the Dominions.39

The speech was well received throughout India, but early in 1918 her popularity began to wane.40 Besant was later to complain that it was her race that led to the decline in her support, and there may have been some truth to this. The London Times commented that her election as President was "some proof that Indian nationalists are not yet well provided with leaders of their own race".41 and Indians themselves may have noted the anomaly although they were far too tactful to mention it. On the other hand, Besant had agreed to moderate her rhetoric during Montagu's visit, disappointing her followers, who expected continued fiery agitation, and leading to doubt as to her commitment to the cause.42

The doubt was well founded, and the greatest reason for Besant's fall from power was the essentially limited, conservative nature of her ideology. Annie Besant was committed to India remaining within the Empire (or Commonwealth) as a self-governing Dominion with the same status as Canada or Australia. No matter what the provocation, she never advocated a complete break with Britain. In fact, she repeatedly warned that England's failure to move toward self-government would radicalize young Indians into complete separatists.43 The events of 1918-1919 were to reveal Annie Besant to be a Moderate in increasingly Extremist times.

The eagerly awaited Montagu-Chelmsford Report was issued in July 1918, and proposed reforms leading to some Indian control in provincial governments only, where all actions could be vetoed by the central authority, which was answerable only to London.44 It suggested that if the provincial program was successful, it could be expanded to cover similar responsibilities of the central government, but no schedule was set. Besant initially rejected the Report as "...unworthy

39 Besant, Congress Presidential Address, 388.
40 Montagu noticed it as early as January 31. Montagu, 234.
41 Times, 2 January 1918, 7.
42 Sitaramayya, 137.
44 At the provincial level, the Report followed the Irish example of designating portfolios which were to be 'transferred' to elected Indians (including education, health and public works), and those reserved to the English appointees (such as security, justice and land administration).
of England to offer and unworthy of India to accept", claiming its enactment would lead to a "perpetual slavery which can only be broken by revolution." At this point Gandhi was urging support for the proposed reforms.

But the events following the passage of the Rowlatt Act in March 1919 caused Besant to change her mind. The Rowlatt Committee had been charged with formulating a response to terrorism, but the report the Committee returned in April 1918 proposed giving unlimited powers to the police to define and combat "conspiracy". All Indian nationalists regarded it as a slap in the face. Besant argued "it would deprive the people of the very few privileges that they possessed in the name of liberty and subject them to the rule of police." When the Rowlatt Act was passed, Gandhi began organizing the Rowlatt satyagraha, a mass movement of civil disobedience employing tactics he had found successful in South Africa. The Rowlatt satyagraha marked Gandhi's first emergence onto the national stage. Besant argued that, because the Act was aimed at truly seditious behavior, civil disobedience was an inappropriate response.

A number of us resolved that we would ignore [the Rowlatt Act] when it became law, disregarding its impossible restrictions;...we had asked for reform, and we were given harsher repression...But it left nothing we could disregard as a protest, unless we were revolutionaries...To break other non-tyrannous laws, which one had hitherto obeyed, because a new tyrannous law had in it no clause that one could righteously disregard, seemed to me illogical and absurd.

In truth, she was afraid of all movements that relied upon the support of the masses. Her entire organization had been built upon the "loyal educated classes" of India:

Almost the whole of that membership [of Theosophical Society] is made up of English-educated men and women. We have scarcely touched the masses of the people...Better to work among those who influence the masses, than in masses themselves, as regards reformation and change. Changes should always begin above and work downwards...changes which begin in the masses tend to bring about revolutions rather than reforms.


46 Quoted in Brown, 133.

47 The had been a surge in Sikh terrorist movements in the Punjab during World War I.


49 Besant, The Future, 238.

50 Besant, "The Work of the Theosophical Society in India", 239.
This fear of revolution was repeated during her losing campaign against Gandhi's 1920 Non-Cooperation movement.51

But it is important that everyone should understand that Non-Co-operation is a revolutionary method, as much as taking up arms. Attempts to transform Government by reforms is constitutional; to destroy a Government whether by machine-gun or paralysis is revolutionary...52

Besant perceived definite advantages to the British connection. Certainly the British Raj had united India politically as it had never been in the past. In addition, the English language provided a cohesive element in a nation torn by ethnic and linguistic rivalries.53 Besant also viewed the growing pan-Islamic movement, which was reacting with increasing violence to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, as a threat to India's unity and believed that the secular British influence kept religious antagonism in check. Finally, Besant doubted the ability of India to provide for its own defense, and she was fearful of Japanese aggression. "As part of a great Commonwealth, the strength of the whole Commonwealth is her defence."54

This analysis of India's condition, combined with the spectacular failure of the Rowlatt satyagraha which Gandhi later called it his "Himalayan miscalculation", pushed Besant into closer alliance with the Government and the Congress Moderates. Not even the Amritsar massacre of April 1919, in which 500 unarmed demonstrators were killed by soldiers who fired without warning, nor the acquittal by the House of Lords of the general who had ordered it, could sway her from her determination to "utilize to the utmost even a fragment of reform in order to get the whole".55 She therefore advocated participation in the 1921 elections, the first held under the 1919 Government of India Act incorporating the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. The Indian National Congress, under Gandhi's direction, boycotted the elections.

The period of World War I—with its rhetoric of self-determination, the granting of Home Rule to Ireland (albeit suspended for the duration), the rise of Japan as a world power, and the success of Lenin's anti-imperialist revolution in Russia—led to a groundswell of nationalist agitation among colonized peoples world-wide. The disappointments that followed when the Versailles Conference made it clear that 'self-determination' was considered appropriate only for Europeans and the imperial powers merely divided up the German spoils in the third-world,

51 The Non-Cooperation movement was undertaken to protest the Amritsar massacre and its aftermath (see below), and the Treaty of Sevres, which divided the Ottoman Empire among the Allied powers.

52 Annie Besant, ed., Gandhian Non-Co-operation or Shall India Commit Suicide? (Madras: "New India" Office, 1920), 25.

53 In fact, when Indira Gandhi added Hindi to English as India's official languages, riots broke out throughout the country, particularly in the south.


55 Ibid., 98-99.
radicalized many of those nationalists. But for Annie Besant (who was, after all, seventy years old in 1917) the revolutionary extension of her propaganda was frightening, and she pulled back to the safety of "Home Rule within the Empire".

There is no question that Besant's organizational and propaganda techniques transformed Indian nationalist politics, and it was, ironically, her vision of an independent India within the Commonwealth that eventually prevailed. But in the heady days of 1920, her cautious, gradualist approach could not compete with Gandhi's mass appeal for "swaraj within a year". This has led to widely differing historical evaluations of her impact on Indian nationalism. For some, Annie Besant is "the white-robed warrior from the South";56 to others "she was always a brilliant outsider, who was admired, listened to and often utilized, but she was never a political heavy-weight".57

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