



MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN C.P.RAMASWAI IYER AND ANNIE BESANT

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ABSTRACT :

Misunderstanding cropped up between C.P. Ramaswai Iyer (C.P.) and Annie Besant straining their relationship. It was most unfortunate, to say the least. Superficial observers traced the origin of the unpleasantness to Besant's attitude towards the Rowlatt legislation. To justify her support for this most infamous enactment, which was resisted by all Indians without exception, she said that the Act had been changed so largely that there was nothing in it to which "a good citizen can object." It was a pity that she had cleanly forgotten that she herself had loudly protested against the Defence Act when it was applied against her during the war.

KEYWORDS : Annie Besant , Home Rule , New India , Satyagraha , Rowlatt , Montagu , Satyamurti , Congress

INTRODUCTION

Annie Besant's illogical statement, "when the mob begins to pelt them (soldiers) with brickbats, it is more merciful to order the soldiers to fire a few volleys of buckshots," shocked even her close associates. Such contradictory statements in her paper led to the impression that there was "a lack of co-ordination among the various editors of *New India*."¹ In fact, after this statement of Besant, the circulation of *New India*, "declined with a rush."²

Well-informed people, however, attributed the temporary discord between C.P. and Besant to the affairs of the All-India Home Rule League (AIHRL), which were "shrouded in mystery." And there was truth in it. When Gandhiji organised the Satyagraha Movement - the first of its kind - in April 1919 against the "Black Bill," the Madras Presidency became its epicentre. Besant's AIHRL dissociated itself from it. But as the events went, Besant could easily gather that the dissociation remained more in theory than in practice. Because, the Bombay Branch of the AIHRL had, as its Secretaries, men who were also Secretaries of the Satyagraha Sabha. This led some enthusiasts to think that the Home Rule and Satyagraha Movements were identical and that working for the one meant working for the other as well. This upset Besant who complained that the zealots did not realise the "subtle and legal differences" between the two movements: one was "law-abiding" and the other "law-breaking."³ Her charge was that the fact of the office-bearers being the same was taken advantage of to push the Satyagraha. This was enough to provoke her into forming in all haste, a new League - the National Home Rule League.



It was very probable that the leading lights of the Bombay Home Rule League, who deeply resented her opposition to the Rowlatt Satyagraha and felt hurt at her inaugurating a new Home Rule League, decided to eliminate Besant from the All-India Home Rule League - an organisation that she herself had founded. As the first step towards this, the elections to the League held at Delhi in February 1919, were rendered null and void.

This enraged Besant so much that when she visited Simla to obtain priority certificates for her own deputation to England, she returned to the Government the priority certificates already issued to the members of the AIHRL deputation to England in fulfilment of the Delhi resolution.⁴ This was construed to be an inexcusable act on her part.

Before another election of the office-bearers was held, a promise was extracted from Besant that she would resign her headship of the League soon after her election. Accordingly, an election was held on 11th May 1919 in which the following were declared elected to the AIHRL by the voters of the Bombay and Madras Provincial Councils: Annie Besant, President; Jinnah, Motilal Nehru, Bhurgri, Narasimha Iyer, Rangaswamy Iyengar and C.P., Vice Presidents; C.P., Jawaharlal Nehru and Umar Sobani, General Secretaries; and Ratansi D. Morarji, Treasurer. As per her promise, Besant resigned her position as President immediately after she was elected and it was accepted at once. Equally swiftly, Besant published a letter in the press that she was made to resign "not due to any failure of mine as regards Home Rule, but to the offence I have given by opposing the Satyagraha Movement' and because, when rioting and the probability of invasion arose, I said that all good citizens should stand by the King's Government and avoid all agitation and criticism till the troubles were over." She concluded that the League would never find one who loved India more than she did.⁵

The publication of the letter by Besant cut C.P. to the quick. He sent a strongly worded reply to the press accusing Besant of publishing her letter without the prior permission of the council of the AIHRL. The central point of his letter was to justify her forced resignation which became inevitable for two reasons: the formation by her of a new League at Banaras without notice to the older organisation and the unauthorised surrender to the Government of the priority certificates issued to the deputationists.⁶ A war of attrition dragged on for some time in *New India* with Besant's supporters accusing C.P. of being unkind to Besant. The public felt that it was totally in the dark where the affairs of the AIHRL were concerned. Some of her own supporters however held that Besant was not right in returning the priority certificates granted to the Home Rule deputation without the consent of those who managed the affairs of the League after the cancellation of the Delhi elections. Even if she did not know who the newly elected office bearers of the League were, she should at least have returned them to C.P. who lodged them under her custody.

The main problem with Besant was that she was highly inconsistent: rejecting agitation this minute and advocating the same the next. About the Reforms Scheme, her views were constantly changing from one extreme to another. The first instinct of the Home Rule League under her stewardship was to reject it in toto. Her *New India* condemned it downright as a "bitter insult" to India. But later she accepted the Reforms Bill and in justification of this change of attitude she said that the Joint Select Committee to which the Bill was referred had changed it beyond recognition! The fact of the matter was she had two "satisfactory" talks with Montagu, who agreed to hand over Education and Industries to the Transferred half when diarchy came into operation.⁷ It was also a fact that she initially opposed the reforms simply because she was angry with Montagu who, she alleged, had broken a promise made to her to take her into confidence before he left India. Mrs. Lutyens conveyed this to Montagu. But the latter, who had preserved carefully the notes he had taken of all his interviews, asserted that he made no such promise because he could not take Besant into confidence. But he added "at the same time, I did extend considerable confidence to C.P. Ramaswami Iyer."⁸ Again, she fought for Home Rule and also worked against the Congress programme of non-co-operation. It was chiefly on account of this that she became comparatively friendless and lost her political popularity as easily as she won it.⁹

During this period, the agile Besant was feeling much depressed. Apart from the fact that she was ageing, the depression could have possibly been engendered by the enforced idleness during her internment. Her subsequent elevation to the Congress Presidency made her overestimate her position. Above all, she had an unshakeable belief that she was more concerned with India's well being than the most patriotic Indian.

The major political developments commencing from the twenty-fourth session of the Madras Provincial Conference held at Kanchipuram in May 1918 hastened her exit from the world of active politics.

At this conference, presided over by Sarojini Naidu, Besant moved her resolution soliciting India's unconditional help to Britain in her war efforts in the full confidence that the latter would reciprocate this gesture by granting constitutional reforms. The man-power clause of this resolution, which envisaged the formation of a citizen army to defend India from invasion, was vigorously challenged by S. Satyamurti who moved an amendment recommending its deletion.¹⁰ He held that recruitment was impossible without a declaration from the Government about the political future of India. He had the very influential support of Kasturiranga Iyengar in this respect.¹¹ Among those who supported Besant strongly was C.P. who lambasted both Kasturiranga Iyengar and Satyamurti. He said it looked as if the conference intended not to do anything to stimulate recruitment to the regular army to help the Government unless the Congress-League Scheme was granted. He tried to impress on them that as members of the Home Rule League and of the Congress organisation, they were duty bound to affirm that "India's connection with the British throne was the main concomitant of political progress of India... Military training was a sine qua non of political progress. ... it was the duty (of educated men) to use all their methods and influence in recruiting persons not only for the regular army but also for the new citizen army."¹²

Although after all the hullabaloo that made the session most stormy, both Besant and Satyamurti bowed to each other - Besant abandoning her resolution altogether and Satyamurti wholeheartedly accepting the entire resolution - the conference did mark the sinking of the Besantine political star. From the mid-1918, with no programme of action, the Home Rule League was allowed to decline. Some of the young and energetic members were no longer in it. Besant's bellicosity towards the British alienated her from the moderates who did not attend either the special Congress held at Bombay in August or the annual session held at Delhi in December 1918. She seemed to have lost much of the influence and power she exercised over the nationalist wing also despite her persistence in advancing her views on Indian reform with vigour and volubility. Ultimately her leadership was rejected and her resignation demanded, from the very same organisation which was her own brainchild.

As C.P. regretfully stated, despite his wholesome regard for Besant in political matters, he had to part company with one who helped me as no other human being has helped me in life; and he had to dissociate himself from Besant's League "notwithstanding that my veneration and regard for her continued to be as lively and profound as ever and notwithstanding also that with tears in her eyes Dr. Besant told me that she had actually received the message and had received similar messages on which she had acted. Dr. Besant, throughout her life, was transparently honest and with me she took the position of a second mother. Nevertheless I had to be guided by my own reason and part company in political matters with her."¹³

To conclude, actually, the disagreement between C.P. and Annie Besant had a deeper cause. It was seen that gradually from the middle of 1918 there were pronounced changes in Besant's political thinking, some of them most startling. In 1919, she attributed her decision to take a particular line regarding the policy of the Home Rule Movement to the message she had received from Lord Maitreya and some other Mahatmas. This was totally disagreeable to C.P. who had a marked distaste for the religious activities of Besant. He was most unhappy that a political organisation was put on a footing that smacked of supernaturalism. So, at the peak of the Home Rule Movement, when Besant relied entirely on C.P., he had to openly differ from her on this point.

END NOTES

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3. *The Hindu*, 27 May 1919.
4. *New India*, 13 May 1919.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. V.S.S. Sastri to V.S. Ramaswamy Sastri, 12 June 1919, .V.S.S., Sastri Papers (Adyar Library).

8. Saroja Sundararajan, *Sir. C.P.Ramasamy Aiyar, A Biography*, New Delhi: 2002, p.62.
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10. *The Hindu*, 11 May 1918.
11. *Madras Mail*, 13 May 1918.
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