

## Works of Women's Indian Association (WIA) & Role of Annie Besant

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*The year 1917 was significant for many reasons. The important one is the formation of Women's Indian Association (WIA).<sup>1</sup> This association was started at Adayar, Madras on 8 May 1917.<sup>2</sup> The founding members of this organization were Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins<sup>3</sup> and Dorothy Jinarajadasa.<sup>4</sup> It was the first organization to create an overall awakening among women and to train them to shoulder their responsibility in public services and bind them together for mutual service and the good of the country.<sup>5</sup> It was also concerned with influencing government policy on women's suffrage and issues related to educational and social reforms. Since its inception the Women's Indian Association was involved in political matters. The presence and leadership of Mrs. Annie Besant provided an impetus to women to think in terms of political freedom.<sup>6</sup> In 1917, Annie Besant stimulated the Home Rule movement in Tamil Nadu. Women's Indian Association (WIA) branches proposed that equal treatment and status should be given to Indians. They also supported compulsory primary education for girls and Hindu women's inheritance laws.<sup>7</sup> Describing themselves as the "Daughters of India".*

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- ❖ To guide the nation
- ❖ To serve the poor
- ❖ To promote women's education and compulsory universal primary education
- ❖ To abolish child marriage
- ❖ To raise the age of sexual consent to sixteen for women
- ❖ To win female suffrage

### BRANCHES OF WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION (WIA)

In 1917 itself the Women's Indian Association started 33 branches in many towns. In 1922 this association had 43 branches and 2300 members.<sup>8</sup> In 1924 it had 51 branches, 18 centers and a membership of 2700.<sup>9</sup> In the year 1927 the Women's Indian Association (WIA) had 71 branches, 21 centers and 3800 members.<sup>10</sup> From all major cities in India,

Women's Indian Association (WIA) was the premier women's association in that time. It not only secured franchise for Indian women but also secured for them the right to sit in the council. The political policy of this association was to work for reforms through the legislative councils. The other work of this association was to promote education and religious tolerance.<sup>11</sup>

Stri-Dharma was the official organ of Women's Indian Association (WIA) and it was a monthly publication and it became a journal after three and half years. It was published in English but included articles in both Tamil and Hindi. It carried news and events of interest to women, reports from the branches and articles on women's condition. It was "the voice, ear, eye of our members, it will speak what we would say to each other and through the words written on its pages we shall see what sisters would say to us."<sup>12</sup> The association insisted that women should dedicate their responsibilities to

India as wives and mothers. It had the tendency to train, guide and form character of the future rulers of India.<sup>13</sup>

### ORGANIZATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Constitution was drafted for Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the article- I dealt with the name of the association i.e. **"The Women's Indian Association"**. It started growing and the numbers increased steadily. In 1930 it had 72 branches, 23 centers which had more than 4000 members.<sup>14</sup> Many branches were formed in places where ever it was possible and local secretary was appointed to look after and arrange the work in order to suit the local conditions in order to report to the head quarters. Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas like religion, education, politics and philanthropy. The organization defined women as religious "by nature" and encouraged non-sectarian religious activity. But the most important work was education and the branches were encouraged to set up adult classes for literacy, sewing and first aid. The Women's Indian Association (WIA) had been politically active from the beginning when they sent a delegation to meet with secretary of state Montague in 1917 to request the franchise for women. The fourth area of work was philanthropy, it involved feeding the poor, setting up shelters for widows and providing relief for disaster victims.<sup>15</sup>

The annual subscription of twelve annas must be paid to the head quarters of the association by its members. After some years of its formation, Women's Indian Association (WIA) added a clause to its constitution which said the political policy of the association was to work for reform through the legislative councils, for voting rights.<sup>16</sup>

### FUNCTIONS OF WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION (WIA)

Many of the Indian women already belonged to the Tamil Madhar Sangam (Tamil Ladies' Association) and had joined with British women in forming the National Indian Association to promote female education, particularly English language instruction, and the teaching of crafts. As the two groups began to mix more freely, they decided to form Ladies' Recreational Club to sponsor tea parties and games like badminton and tennis. Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa were proposing a new organization that would combine education, crafts and sports.<sup>17</sup>

Women's Indian Association (WIA) dispersed mainly in the political development, social upliftment, educating women, eradicating the grievances of womanhood and struggle for freedom. Like East and West, the service to India and humanity was build with the spirit of internationalism. Annie Besant became the first president and continued to be in the post for seventeen long years till her death. Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Ammu Swaminathen, Mrs. Dadhabhoy and Ambujammal served as honorary secretaries.<sup>18</sup>

In 1922, the 43 branches of Women's Indian Association (WIA) supported that equal status and treatment should be given to Indians, compulsory primary education to girls and also supported the Hindu women inheritance law. In 1922-1923 the compulsory primary education was provided by all branches. In this period there were a number of appointments in municipal councils and local government to women. Most of the board members belonged to Women's Indian Association (WIA). Margaret Cousins, Secretary of Women's Indian Association (WIA), was the First woman in

India to be an honorary magistrate. She also prohibited the labour of women and children in coal mines.<sup>19</sup>

In May 1923 Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Patwardhan and Mrs. and Miss Tata attended as delegates to the Congress of International Suffrage Alliance in Rome. This association sent protest to the South African Government against their continued exclusion of women from the rights of citizenship. This association also wrote League of Nations to include women in their committees. It supported Japanese women to attend political meetings and to form political associations. Madras Corporation accepted the compulsory primary education for boys and girls in 1924 and it started in 1925. During this period Women's Indian Association (WIA) started women's home of service for women's development in Mylapore, Madras. The period between 1924-1926 was called the child welfare period. All the branches made interest to increase child welfare work. All the members were involved in guiding girls for protecting the children in a systematic manner.<sup>20</sup>

The sixth All India Women's Conference was held in Madras in 1931 for which Women's Indian Association (WIA) was the reception committee. The main resolution passed in this meeting was to support to all that was "Swadeshi". In 1932-1933 the resolution of Temple entry for all was passed. Women's Indian Association (WIA) members were spending much from their own pockets for their work. Many social service institutions were established by this association such as Madras Sevasadan, Madras children's aid society, Swadeshi emporium and Montessori schools.<sup>21</sup>

The Women's Indian Association was instrumental in starting the vigilance association at Madras for the betterment of women and

children in Madras. The police of Madras with the help of the vigilance association closed one hundred and fifty houses of illfame at Madras in 1934 itself. This association started and maintained Rescue homes and Orphanages. It was due to the efforts of the association and its members that the Madras Children's Aid Society came into existence and the "Juvenile Court" was established. Mrs. Margret Cousins was appointed as the first honourable magistrate for the Juvenile Court. The Seva Sadan, Avvai Home, the Montessorie School at Patteon Garden and Rescue home were initiated and set on foot by the efforts of Women's Indian Association.<sup>22</sup> Women's Indian Association (WIA) offered its valuable suggestion on four important reform bills before the Assembly. They were,

- Mr. B. Das's Sarada Act amended bill.
- Dr. Deshmukh's bill to Amend Hindu Law governing Hindu Women's rights to property.
- Dr. Bhagavan Das bill to validate marriages among caste of Hindus.
- Rao Bahadur M.C. Raj's bill for removal of caste disabilities.<sup>23</sup>

## ANNIE BESANT

Annie Besant was one of the important persons to establish the Women's Indian Association in Adayar, Madras. She was born on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1847 in London, the capital of England. Param Emilet, her mother, Dr. William page wood, her father was from Ireland. When she was 5 years old, her father passed away.<sup>24</sup> So her family faced great difficulties. So she had to leave home at the age of thirteen in 1861. She came to stay with Miss Maryat in Paris who was stern and religious. Besant did not spend all her time in religious activities and found time to read translations of Plato, Dante and the Iliad.

These readings laid the foundation of her political career.<sup>25</sup> The two main tragedies of her early life were her rejection of Christianity and her marriage. She was married in 1867 to Frank Besant, a clergyman, but the marriage proved to be a failure. Mrs. Besant had to seek divorce of family life. As a consequence she had to come out into the world. This gave her the opportunity to gain experience in the varied professions which she had to adopt to earn her living. She worked as a cook, nurse to support herself.<sup>26</sup>

She joined the Theosophical Society under the influence of Madam Blavatsky.<sup>27</sup> In 1892 Madam Blavatsky died and Mrs. Besant along with Mr. W.O. Judge became joint head of the Esoteric Section of the Society. She came to India in 1893.<sup>28</sup> She had lot of interest in the Brahma Samaj in India. So she stayed in Adayar, Madras, because the head quarter of Brahma Samaj was there.<sup>29</sup>

Mrs. Besant raised her voice against the caste system. Her interpretation of the East was not very tasteful to the people with the result she had to face a certain amount of opposition, but this opposition was insignificant, because the majority were appreciative of her service to induism. She also raised her voice against child marriage and untouchability.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. Besant began her crusade for education, with the declared ideal that it was to be “an education founded on Indian ideals and enriched not dominated by thought and culture of the west.” In 1897 she established Central Hindu College at Banares and was able to build a full-fledged college in the next two years.<sup>31</sup> Later she opened schools and colleges for girls as well. Among such institutions are, Central Hindu Girls school at Banares, Madanapalli High school and College and Adayar National College.<sup>32</sup>

In 1911 Mrs. Besant organized the “order of the Rising Star.” This organization was for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evils, for the sake of firmly establishing righteousness. Mrs. Besant blamed England for ruling Indians on Western lines.<sup>33</sup> In 1912 Mrs. Besant organized a band of public workers, namely “The Brothers of Service” with a view to promoting union amongst the workers in the spiritual, educational and political fields under the parentage of Indian National congress. She also suggested at the congress session of 1913 to sponsor a national movement embodying religious, educational, social as well as political reforms. She brought out a weekly paper the ‘commonweal’ to do the required propaganda.<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Besant joined the congress in 1914 and she brought new ideas, talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organization and a new outlook into the field of congress.<sup>35</sup> The same year she was elected as a delegate for the congress session and spoke for the first time moving a resolution which was carried asking for reciprocate between India and the colonies in the matter of emigration. Political equality with the other citizens of the empire was also demanded.<sup>36</sup>

To educate the people and to make know the demand of a nation to the ruling power, Mrs. Besant felt the necessity of having a press of her own. She bought the daily news paper ‘Madras Standard’ in July 1914, and was registered herself its sole proprietor, publisher and printer. The title of the paper was later changed to ‘New India’. In her paper she wrote a series of articles on self-government and announced her intention to lead a political campaign in favour of ‘swaraj’.<sup>37</sup>

Her writings and speeches during this period mainly dealt with arguments against the British rule. i.e., the poverty of India, employment of Indians in the public services, executive bias in the administration of justice, army commissions and railway policy. At the same time she paid glowing tributes to India's past greatness.<sup>38</sup>

She attended the Muslim League and Congress sessions in 1915. At the conference of the All India Muslim League she criticized the Government. The commissioners of Bombay police ordered Mrs. Besant to leave the platform. She questioned his authority and asked about warrants for arrest. The commissioner did not take further step.<sup>39</sup>

In 1917 she started 'Scout Movement' in India. Its head quarter was in London. But the London head quarter did not recognize the Indian Scout Movement. So she started 'Indian Boys Scouts Association'. In the same year she was selected the president of Congress Party. She was the first woman president of Congress Party. In 1917 Calcutta session of Congress, she introduced the tri-colour flag for Congress party. In 1918 she started 'India Madar Sangam' at Madras and she was the first president of this association. Through these associations she fights for Indian women's development. She died on 1933 September 20 at Adayar, Madras.<sup>40</sup>

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