

encouraged to meet people, to give talks and lead discussions. *The Order of the Star in the East* was organized to pave the way for the very special work he was to do.

Political Work for India

A new period in Annie Besant's life began in 1913 when she became active in Indian politics, and gave a lead by claiming Home Rule for India. She entered politics because she saw that India's independence was essential for her age-old wisdom to become a beacon for the whole world. The Home Rule movement she organized spread over India. She used all her resources to bring together on the common platform of the 'All India Home Rule League' the two sections of the Indian National Congress which had been divided since 1907.

Later she was elected President of the Indian National Congress inspiring Indians with a dynamic vision of India's future. Since the British government merely suppressed agitation but did little to remove the grievances, she started the *Young Men's Indian Association* in 1914 to train them for public work and donated Gokhale Hall in Madras as a centre for national awakening and free speech. She also started two journals: *The Commonwealth*, a weekly dealing with issues of national reform; and *New India*, a daily newspaper which for fifteen years was a powerful instrument promoting Home Rule and revolutionizing Indian journalism.

Ten months after she began her political work, the Great War broke out. India was called upon to make great sacrifices, which she did gladly but not a single word was said by any British statesman as to India's contribution. This blunder of British statesmen convinced Dr Besant that the political work in India had to continue, and could not be modified or slackened because the Empire was at war. She was interned in 1917 for three months because of her success in arousing the love of freedom in the Indian people. She took as her motto not only 'strike while the iron is hot', but also 'make it hot by striking'. She taught Indian journalists to write strong leading articles denouncing the action of the government, yet keeping within the letter of the law. As President of the Indian National Congress, she made the office one of active work throughout the year, instead of only presiding over it during the four-day annual meetings, as was the practice earlier.

Annie Besant's life was one of incredible activity. By 1918 she had started the *Madras Permanent*, opened *Madanapalle College* (now in Andhra Pradesh), inaugurated the *Adyar Arts League*, started the *Home Rule League* in Bombay, started the *Girls' College in Benares*, founded the *Order of the Brothers of Service*, presided over the *Women's Indian Association at Adyar* — from which grew the *All-India Women's Conference* at Poona (now Pune) in 1927 and the *All-Asian Women's Conference* at Lahore in 1931 — and started the *Society for the Promotion of National Education (SPNE)*. Unfortunately, she fell into disfavour with the Indian National Congress because of her opposition to Mr Gandhi's plan of non-cooperation and civil disobedience as she foresaw the danger of instilling disrespect for the law. Although she had a deep regard for Gandhi as someone whose life was guided by truth and compassion, she herself stood for constitutional methods for achieving political reform. Mr Gandhi's policies were adopted and the disasters she had anticipated occurred in various parts of India. Though she became unpopular and lost her position as a political leader, she still continued with her work for India.

Clairvoyant Investigations

Those who came into intimate contact with Annie Besant were aware of her spiritual powers and first-hand knowledge of many occult matters. She used certain of her yogic powers to investigate the nature of the super physical realms, and several books on this recondite subject were written in collaboration with her colleague, C Leadbeater. A remarkable piece of writing done by them was *Occult Chemistry*, in which they described the chemical elements examined by them. The first edition was printed in 1908, when it did not appear possible to reconcile their observations with the scientific knowledge of atomic structure of those times, but recent developments in the field support them. C. Jinarâjadâsa, a former President of the Theosophical Society, published in 1951 a third, enlarged edition of *Occult Chemistry*, containing descriptions of 111 atoms, including 14 isotopes and the molecules of 29 inorganic compounds and 22 organic compounds. Dr Stephen M. Phillips, a theoretical physicist, made a detailed analysis of the Besant–Leadbeater studies in the late 1970s and provided a lucid explanation and reinterpretation of their observations, reconciling them with present-day physics.

Last Days