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Theosophical Society

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Why is in news? Theosophy, Annie Besant and a forgotten lodge in Pune

In a bustling area in Pune, surrounded by educational institutions such as Fergusson College and Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, where students munch on sandwiches or race their bikes, lies a quiet lane.

Here, a blue board announces the **existence of The Poona Lodge Theosophical Society**; alongside is another board advertising 'Homeopathic medicines available'. A double-storied structure with grey bricks in an open courtyard surrounded by trees offers the perfect home for a movement which still draws followers in Pune.

About the society:

The Theosophical Society was founded **in America in 1875** by **Colonel Henry Steel Olcott**, a veteran of the American Civil War, and **Helena Petrovna Blavatsky**, a Russian occultist.

The society was founded to **promote theosophy, a spiritual movement** encompassing a **wide range of beliefs** marrying Eastern religious traditions, mainly that of Hinduism and Buddhism, with western esoteric thought.

It also **emphasised the commonalities** among religious traditions, underlying unity across religions.

Its headquarters at **Adyar in Madras** (currently Chennai).

The society believed that a **special relationship** could be established **between a person's soul and God** by contemplation, prayer, revelation, etc.

It **accepted the Hindu beliefs in reincarnation and karma**, and drew inspiration from the philosophy of the Upanishads and samkhya, yoga and Vedanta schools of thought.

It aimed to **work for universal brotherhood of humanity** without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

Annie Besant led the Theosophical Society, spreading theosophical teachings, advocating for spiritual enlightenment, and fostering unity among diverse spiritual traditions.

Annie Besant became a prominent spokesperson and advocate for the Theosophical Society after joining it.

She was elected President of the society **in 1907**, succeeding its founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

Besant's presidency marked a **watershed moment** in the Theosophical Society's history, as she brought her distinct vision and passion to the fore.

The society also sought to **investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers** latent in man.

The Theosophical Movement came to be **allied with the Hindu renaissance**.

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It **opposed child marriage** and advocated the abolition of caste discrimination, uplift of outcasts, improvement in the condition of widows.

Annie Besant's role:

Annie Besant was a prominent **British social reformer, women's rights activist, and founding member** of the Theosophical Society.

Her unwavering dedication to various causes and tireless efforts left an indelible mark on the societal landscape of her time.

She was also **well-known for her powerful writing. Education, philosophy, and economics** were among the primary concerns on which she focused and worked via the Theosophical Society.

Besant worked with the theosophical Society to **promote spiritual exploration, universal brotherhood, and the pursuit of esoteric wisdom**

Under Besant's leadership, the theosophical Society **expanded its reach and gained international acclaim**. She embarked on extensive lecture tours around the world, delivering talks on Theosophy, spirituality, and esoteric knowledge.

Besant's efforts **aided in the greater understanding and acceptance** of theosophical teachings, particularly in India, where she was instrumental in its revival and dissemination.

Besant's **commitment to social reform and women's rights** extended beyond her involvement in the Theosophical Society.

She **worked tirelessly for women's rights**, such as access to education, birth control, and the right to vote. Her support for Indian independence earned her the respect and admiration of the Indian nationalist movement.

Annie Besant had a keen interest in religion. She demonstrated the **superiority of the ancient Hindu civilization** while **criticizing the western materialistic culture**. During that time, she **also translated the Gita**.

Annie Besant founded a **new boys' school in Banaras** called the **Central Hindu College (CHC)**, which was **based on theosophical principles** and staffed by a number of well-known theosophists. The college served as the nucleus on which Banaras Hindu University was built in 1916.

She believed that among other things, India needed to develop its national spirit.

Together with George Arundale, she established the **Home Rule League in 1917**. Its goal was to accomplish Home Rule.

Numerous congressmen, including Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, supported this.

Although her presidency of the Theosophical Society ended with **her death in 1933**, the organization **continues to thrive as a global organization** dedicated to the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and the exploration of esoteric wisdom.

Significance:

The Theosophical Society provided a common denominator for the various sects and **fulfilled the urge of educated Hindus**.

However, to an average Indian the Theosophist philosophy seemed to be vague and lacking a positive programme, to that extent its **impact was limited to a small segment of the westernised class**.

As religious revivalists, the Theosophists did not attain much success, but as a movement of westerners glorifying Indian religious and philosophical traditions, it gave much needed self-respect to the Indians fighting British colonial rule.

Viewed from another angle, the Theosophists also had the effect of giving a false sense of pride to the Indians in their outdated and sometimes backward looking traditions and philosophy

Shortcomings:

Theosophical Society's teaching could be understood by educated people and it **failed to reach the masses**.

The Association of Theosophical Society with occult practices **put a question mark on the scientific temper** of its members.

Most of the social works done by members of the Theosophical society were **confined to urban areas**.

The political movement supported by the Theosophical Society was **for Home Rule only and not complete independence** as the youth of India at that time demanded.

“World Teacher” project:

Jiddu Krishnamurti's “World Teacher” project, also known as the “**Order of the Star**,” was a **visionary movement sponsored by Theosophical Society leaders**, notably Annie Besant, in the early twentieth century.

The project's goal was to **develop and promote Krishnamurti as a spiritual teacher** capable of leading mankind into a new era of enlightenment and transformation.

However, **in 1929, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order, rejecting the role of a messiah or spiritual authority** and emphasizing the significance of individual inquiry, freedom, and self-understanding in spiritual growth.

The project had a **long-lasting impact on theosophical and spiritual circles**, stimulating debates on the nature of spiritual authority and the significance of personal growth.

Conclusion:

Theosophical Society played a multifaceted role in India.

On one hand, it did not achieve significant success as religious revivalists. However, it made a lasting impact by promoting Indian religious and philosophical traditions, thus instilling a sense of self-respect among Indians fighting against British colonial rule.

Nevertheless, its role in revitalizing Indian spirituality and heritage remains significant, highlighting the need for the recognition of indigenous traditions.

It offered an alternative perspective that encouraged the revaluation of ancient philosophies and traditions in a time when many were inclined to dismiss them as outdated.