

ALTRUISTIC WORK OF TODAY — IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ANNIE BESANT

(Summaries of Symposium Lectures delivered on 2.1.2018)

Padma Venkataraman

I consider it a great honour and privilege to stand before this august gathering to share my views on altruistic work of today in the footsteps of Dr Annie Besant. We, members of the Women's Indian Association, have a long association with the Theosophical Society, Adyar, and Dr Annie Besant; this is our birthplace and Dr Annie Besant is our Founder President. She was the President of WIA for 17 years.

In the words of Sarojini Naidu about Dr Annie Besant: "She came into our midst a stranger and created for herself an honoured and legitimate place in the annals of the glorious and heroic women of our race and tradition."

Dr Annie Besant travelled extensively in India and encouraged women to join the movement to fight not only for the freedom of India, but also for freedom from social evils such as the *devadasi* system (courtesans of a Hindu temple) and child marriage.

Mahatma Gandhi remarked once that Dr Annie Besant had awakened Indians from their deep sleep. Margaret Cousins, co-founder of WIA had said: "Annie Besant is the forerunner of the new age of which already the prominent feature is the emergence of women to power in all aspects of public service."

Socially and politically active leaders like Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sister Subulakshmi, Mrs Herabai Tata, Dr Sarojini dyaya and many more committed leaders strengthened the hands of Annie Besant and worked relentlessly to bring about important social reforms. The most important one was to get women's franchise.

This is a proud moment for WIA, as we have been serving humanity for 100 long years without a break or blemish. Today the activities of WIA have expanded, ranging from promotion of literacy, facilitating skill training, assisting women's self-help groups by promoting livelihood programmes,

disaster management promotion of non-conventional energy sources, awareness programme on climate change, peace, and national integration. We are happy to share with you that WIA has been honoured with the “Peace Ambassador Award” in 2017.

WIA has taken up the cause of the economically marginalized and socially ostracized sections of society. We strive very hard to carry forward the legacy of this legendary organization. While talking about service to humanity it is really worthwhile to contemplate on Dr Besant’s views on service, duty, altruism, and spirituality.

Throughout Dr Annie Besant’s teachings, the use and therefore context of the words, “duty”, “altruism” and “spirituality” are quite precise — particularly when she proposes that “altruism” may not be a spiritual expression.

Altruism, glorious as it is in the lower stages of morality — altruism itself — is lost in the supreme oneness of the human soul, in the absolute

indivisibility of the spirit in man.

In the words of Dr Besant, “as long as service is consciously service of others, that is, of others separated from our own self, there is still incompleteness in the ethics, there is still lack of spirituality in the soul”. Further, she says: “While we are still consciously separate, altruism may rightly be regarded as the law of life. The spiritual man must lead a higher life than the life of altruism.” Further she expounds: “Learn then that the services demanded is that unselfish service that gives everything and asks for nothing in return.”

Dr Annie Besant firmly believed that “the theosophic life must be a life of service. Unless we are serving we have no right to live. And she further said: “I proclaim tonight the universal law of life; for only by service is fullness of life made possible.”

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi: “The best way to find oneself is to lose oneself in the service of others.”

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Angels Torra

The Mahachohan encourages Theosophists to popularise a knowledge of Theosophy, not with an individual selfish purpose, but with the self-sacrificing pursuit of the best means to lead our neighbour on the right path, to cause as many of our fellow creatures as we possibly can to benefit by it.

Dictionaries define “altruism”, or selflessness, as the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others.

Altruistic people have always sacrificed their own comfort and welfare for those suffering injustice and enduring miserable living conditions.

From a Theosophical perspective, the duty of an organisation like ours should be certainly to support others by helping them solve their urgent needs and by working on securing their long-term needs and development as well. For this, a long-term altruism is necessary to help solve the problems

not only of this life, but also of next life, by developing the higher parts of our thinking and through an ethical and

moral attitude towards all the technical and scientific changes that are taking place in the present world.

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Vinay Kumar Patri

The dictionary meaning of “altruism” indicates: “practice or principle of unselfish concern or devotion for others”. It is interesting to see there is a further explanation: “The behaviour of an animal that may be to its own disadvantage, but that benefits others of its kind.” For example, as a warning cry that reveals the location of the caller himself.

Now there could be a question why this flavour of altruism is not displayed constantly. Scientific research seems to answer with computational technologies that lead to the revelation that there is a tremendous amount of cooperation in Nature, as cooperation is not just unique to humans alone but to animals as well. Humans, animals, and plants are made of cells designed to, or have learned to, cooperate long ago. Several animal species display (though inconsistently) the behaviour of sacrifice and courage whenever they

perceive their nest is in danger. This inconsistency may be attributed to the faintness of reception of the call to altruism for others. And many times whatever altruism that may be felt, seems to stop at the first indication of personal discomfort.

However people like Annie Besant saw the suffering in the world. Annie Besant had great skills of oration, articulation and presentation, and always applied them for the benefit of others.

When there is such total dedication without an iota of selfishness the divine element pours forth and those individuals who are contributors are enabled to take on more work with greater energy. Perhaps as a result she went on to create several movements and organizations for the benefit of society in general.

So our work today of taking the lead and example should begin with a fully awakened self without self-glorification.

RECEPTION

On the first day of the Convention, 31 December 2017, a reception hosted by the international President, Mr Tim Boyd, was held at 3.30 pm in the open area near the Administration building. Students of the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School entertained the delegates with songs and dances. This was followed by the little ones from the crèche run by the Social Welfare Centre, who sang nursery rhymes and songs very passionately. This was accompanied by high tea.

The reception, which is held every year on the first day of the Convention, gives the delegates from all over India and the world an opportunity to meet and mingle with each other, catching up with old friends and making new friends.

The Liberal Catholic Church (LCC) at Adyar

The Church of St Michael and All Angels at Adyar had its foundation stone consecrated by The Rt Rev. Charles W. Leadbeater in 1925 and the building was consecrated by The Rt Rev. George S. Arundale in 1936. Services have been held there since then on a regular basis.

The LCC seeks to combine the deep mysticism of the Catholic tradition with the widest measure of intellectual freedom. It maintains that the traditional sacraments from the ancient times are indeed vessels of both grace and spiritual power, which radiate to the wider world as a shower of blessings and spiritual renewal. The morning service on Christmas day was conducted by the Church's Priest-in-charge, The Rev. P. J. John, with the assistance of Mr George Wester, from Australia, as Deacon.

THE RITUAL OF THE MYSTIC STAR

The Ritual of the Mystic Star was created by Bro. C. Jinarajadasa in 1911 at the behest of Dr Annie Besant. The five points of the Star stand for Power, Beauty, Wisdom, Love and Joy. The complementary professions are Judge, Craftsman, Scientist, Healer, and Servant. Together with the Thurifer and Starbearer, there are twelve participants. The Ritual highlights the important teachings of the great World Teachers and other Messengers of the Great White Brotherhood, each teaching marked by lighting a candle and pledging one's faith in the name of the messenger of truth. The invocation to the Master of The Great White Lodge is the climax of the Ritual, and is marked by lighting the tallest candle in the centre. The Ritual concludes by invoking the "powers that be", asking for peace in the world.

The Ritual was held at the Headquarters Hall on the evening of 31 December, the glow from the candles irradiating the entire atmosphere.

OPENING OF THE CONVENTION

The 142nd International Convention is being attended by about 921 delegates on the opening day.

The inaugural function of the Convention took place at the Adyar Theatre at 8:00 a.m. on 31 December 2017, starting with an invocation by the students of the Olcott Memorial Higher Secondary School and the traditional lighting of the lamp by the President, Mr Tim Boyd and others. This was followed by the Prayers of the Religions and the Universal Prayer led by the President. The International Secretary, Ms Marja Artamaa, then announced the release of the book *Leave Your World and Come into Ours*, a collection of articles and speeches by the late Mr Surendra Narayan, former Vice-President of the Society, published by the Kerala Theosophical Federation. Subsequently, the General Secretaries, Organizing Secretaries, or their representatives, and then the Presidential Representatives, as given below, rendered greetings on behalf of their members for the Convention:

Ms Barbara Hebert, USA
Ms Jenny Baker, England
Mr Pradeep Gohil, India
Ms Linda Oliveira, Australia
Ms Birgitta Skrbo, Sweden
Mr John Vorstermans, New Zealand
Mr Wim Leys, Netherlands
Mr Jacques Mahnich, France
Ms Patrizia Calvi, Italy
Ms Mirva Jaatinen, Finland
Ms Sabine van Osta, Belgium
Mr Esteban R. Langlois, Argentina
Mr Sergio C. de Moraes, Jr, Brazil

Ms Angels Torra, Spain
Mr Vicente Hao Chin, Jr, Philippines
Mr John Osmond Boakye, West Africa
Mr Andreas Isberg, Norway
Mr Robert Beland, Canada
Mr Jose Foglia, Uruguay
Ms Isis de Resende, America Central
Ms Irena Primc, Slovenia
Ms Svitlana Gavrylenko, Ukraine
Ms Andrea Biasca-Caroni, Switzerland
Mr B.L. Bhattacharyya, Bangladesh
Ms Nancy Secrest, TOS International
Mr Jan Nicolaas Kind, ITC

The International Secretary then announced that a large number of greetings and good wishes were received from members and others all over the world, for the auspicious start and fruitful proceedings of the Convention. The President then formally welcomed the gathering and invoked the blessing of the elder Brethren. He proceeded to deliver the Presidential Address, starting with the assertion that the Society has to progress “from teachings to insight and from student to exemplar”, which only “justifies the existence of the TS”. He then went on to present a comprehensive report on the activities of the Society throughout the world, using the widely acclaimed video format, a novel feature introduced last year.



THEOSOPHY AROUND THE WORLD

The highlight of this year for the **East and Central African** Section was the visit of Vicente Hao Chin, Jr, from the Philippines, who was the guest speaker at their 48th Convention, held at Kampala, Uganda, from 12 to 14 April, on “The Art and Science of Happiness”. He delivered three public lectures during the 3-day Convention. He also toured all the Regions in East & Central Africa during his 19-day trip, giving 6 public talks in different cities. In Nairobi he conducted a very successful Self-Transformation

Seminar. Their membership is now 136 in 5 Lodges.

The **South African** Section has gone through difficult times over recent months. It has 6 Lodges, but membership has been affected by the large number of emigrations to the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe. It has 135 members, a drop of 16 from last year. The crime wave is another factor affecting attendance at Lodge meetings. They are also having difficulty attracting and keeping younger members. The

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The **West African** Section annual Convention was held on 8 and 9 July with three lectures on “Technology, Theosophy, and Science”. After each lecture there were questions and con-

tributions, which enriched their deliberations. Topics taken up at the Council Meeting held during the Convention were: (1) establishment of a bookshop, (2) starting a journal of the TS in West Africa, (3) study programs, and (4) publicity activities and public lectures. They decided to work on these 4 items during the coming year. Their membership is steady at 242 in 11 Lodges.

The East and Southeast Asia Presidential Agency, is present in 4 countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and Myanmar) with an active Lodge in each. The **Singapore** Lodge, formed in 1889, is the largest, with a membership of 358. The team that develops the Chinese website is based in this Lodge. The Selangor Lodge, formed in 1929, is the sole Lodge in **Malaysia** and has 94 members. **Japan’s** 45-year old Nippon Lodge in Tokyo has 45 members. The Yangon Theosophical Society in **Myanmar** has the Olcott Lodge, with 46 members. There was quite a large turnover with 61 incoming and 69 outgoing members during the year. The total number of members for the Presidential Agency is 543, a decrease of 8 from last year.

The **Australian** Section membership is reported at 812 in 11 Lodges and 6 study centers. Notable highlights of their activities during the year included: (1) The January National Convention in Hobart, on the theme “Eastern Spirituality, Psyche, and the Human Journey”, featuring a fine public talk by Dr Bruno Cayoun on “The Core Mechanisms of Buddhist Spirituality”. (2) The very suc-

successful tour by Dr Pablo Sender, from the USA, which included the School of Theosophy as well as his professionally recorded weekend seminar in Launceston. He also spoke at several Lodges. (3) The offer of an annual prize at the University of Western Australia for a third year undergraduate course on "Philosophy East and West"; an official response is awaited. Interestingly, their book depot of some fifty specially selected books at the National Headquarters continued to attract sales during the year at cost recovery prices.

The Presidential Representative of **Bangladesh**, Mr B. L. Bhattacharyya, reports that 2 new Lodges were chartered and 3 more are in the process. He kept close contact with all the Lodges and sent them study materials, including *At the Feet of the Master* and I. K. Taimni's *Principles of Theosophical Work*. Their membership is now 300, an increase of 27 from last year, working in 11 Lodges.

The annual Convention of the **Indian** Section, with 11,394 members in 408 Lodges under 16 Federations, was inaugurated by me and chaired by international Vice-President Dr Chittaranjan Satapathy at Adyar in January. The largest Section of the TS Adyar had a change of General Secretary with Mr Pradeep H. Gohil assuming the post, succeeding Mr S. Sundaram. Mr Pradip Mahapatra was nominated as Joint General Secretary. Short talks by Mr O. P. Aneja, Mrs Nandita Kuldip, and Dr P. S. P. Sarangi on "Self-preparation: An Important Aspect of Theosophical Work" were well received by the delegates. "Theosophy — Defin-

ing the Indefinable" was the theme for the three-day 94th South India Conference at Adyar in April, inaugurated by Marja Artamaa, international Secretary, welcomed by Mr Gohil, and attended by around 100 delegates. There were talks by four speakers, followed by workshops. The Section headquarters at Varanasi hosted the North India study camp held over three days in October 2016 on N. Sri Ram's *An Approach to Reality*, directed by Prof. R. C. Tampi. A series of over five study camps were conducted from April to June at the Himalayan Centre for Theosophical Studies in Bhowali, on topics such as *Self Realization through Love* by I. K. Taimni, teachings of J. Krishnamurti, the Upanishads from a Theosophical perspective, and so on.

Visits and talks were conducted at various locations during the year by the National Lecturers. The Central Property Committee set up last year at Varanasi to manage the properties of the Society started work on reconstruction of facilities, obtaining legal title for properties, and so on. The TOS South Zone conference was held over two days in July at Kakinada with Nancy Secret, international Secretary, as the chief guest, and the North Zone conference was held in Varanasi in August with the General Secretary officiating as chief guest. *The Indian Theosophist*, mouthpiece of the Indian Section, had a special issue commemorating the 100th anniversary of Annie Besant's elevation to the presidency of the Indian National Congress, leading to independence for India.

The **Indonesian** Section reports an

increase of 15 members and one more Lodge, totalling 209 members in 15 Lodges and one study center.

The President of the Covenant Lodge, Abraham Oron, in Tel Aviv, **Israel**, had weekly study sessions for members on a variety of subjects. They also held 3 seminars during the year, with from 28 to 34 participants. The last one, in June, was led by Tran-Thi-Kim-Dieu, Chairman of the European Federation, which was well received. Their YouTube channel now has more than 40 films on various Theosophical topics. They have 67 members and 5 study groups.

The **New Zealand** Section hosted the Indo-Pacific Federation conference in Auckland from 14 to 19 October 2016 with 110 delegates from around the Indo-Pacific region, and several guests from Europe and Brazil. They were pleased to have Lily and me present. Their Science Seminar followed from 19 to 21 October with speakers having professional scientific backgrounds from Australia, France, India, and New Zealand. Their annual convention was held in Dunedin in January 2017, with guest speakers Tran-Thi-Kim-Dieu from France and Elena Dovalsantos from the USA, on “Theosophy — Science, Spirituality, and Consciousness”. A School of Theology studies Dorothy Bell on the theme: “A Theosophical Worldview — the Power Revealed”, which was a well-presented program. The Section sent 7 national speakers to the 13 branches around the country to support their work.

They have 619 members in 4 study centers.

The TS in the **Philippines** (TSP) annual Convention was held at their National Headquarters with Leni Robredo, Vice-President of the Philippine Republic, as the guest speaker. During the convention, a new set of national board of trustees was elected, including the reelection of Roselmo Doval-Santos as National President. The Section Headquarters continues to publish *The Theosophical Digest*, among other periodicals. The Section sponsored a 3-hour Zazen Meditation session conducted by Sister Sonia Punzalan, a Catholic nun. They have 235 members in 20 Lodges and 10 study centers.

The General Secretary of the **Argentinian** Section, Esteban Langlois, says that national events took place in San Lorenzo in November 2016 on “Genealogy of Man” by Annie Besant, with 3 speakers and 50 members from the Section. Another event was held in Buenos Aires in the spring on “Reincarnation and Life after Death”. It was attended by over 70 members and visitors from Argentina and Uruguay. Both their Summer Schools took place in the San Rafael Theosophical Center. Mr Langlois visited 7 Lodges across the country. In February a new Section website was opened: <www.sociedadteosofica.org.ar>, and also a YouTube channel including my video blog with Spanish subtitles. The Section has 303 members in 17 Lodges and 8 study centers.

Number of delegates registered as of Monday, 1 January: 950

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