

MRS. BESANT IN INDIA

THE year 1893 stands out in a special way, because it was then that Mrs. Annie Besant made her first visit to India. Long before her arrival, she had identified herself so strongly in thought with Indian civilisation that she called India even then her "Motherland". Her coming to India made a very great difference to the Theosophical Movement throughout the country. An unusual amount of energy was released in Indian members by her fervour and eloquence wherever she went, and they threw themselves with vigour into many schemes of reconstruction for the country. Theosophical ideas were presented by her not merely with marvellous eloquence, but from a lofty standpoint which made a profound impression on the sensitive Hindu mind. Soon Mrs. Besant made India her home, journeying to Europe for the sake of the work. She quickly dedicated herself to reviving the best elements of Hinduism, just as Colonel Olcott had thrown himself into purifying and revitalising Buddhism. Mrs. Besant first set foot on Indian soil at Tuticorin on November 16, 1893.

In presenting Mrs. Besant to the Convention of 1893, Colonel Olcott spoke with deep feeling as follows:

"The night's blackness is rolling away, the dawn of a happier day is breaking. Thanks—as I believe—to the kind help of those whom I call my Masters and the Elder Brothers of the race, our patient and loyal persistence is about being rewarded by help of the most valuable kind, for they have sent me "Annabai" to share my burden, relieve our mental distress, and win

the respect and sympathy of good people. While she is not yet able to quite fill the void left by the departure of my Co-Founder, H. P. B., she will be in time, and meanwhile is able to render service that her Teacher could not, by her peerless oratory and her scientific training. This meeting will be historical, as marking her first appearance at our Annual Conventions—her first, but not her last, for I have some reason to hope that she will devote a certain part of her future years to Indian work.”

Of Mrs. Besant's many activities for India, the first which brought with it wonderful fruit was the starting of the Central Hindu School and College in Benares. With the help of money sent to her by English Theosophists, she first purchased the property which is now the Headquarters of the Indian Section of the T.S. Within this property is her Benares home “Shanti Kunj,” which became quickly the centre of a devoted band of workers who gathered round her. These workers were both Indian and European, and they started a Boys' School, which slowly grew till it became a College, and later was transformed into the present Hindu University of Benares. Similarly also, a small Girls' School was started later, and this has since developed into a Women's College. This part of Mrs. Besant's contributions, in the name of Theosophy and of the Masters, to the welfare of India is too full a story to be narrated here.

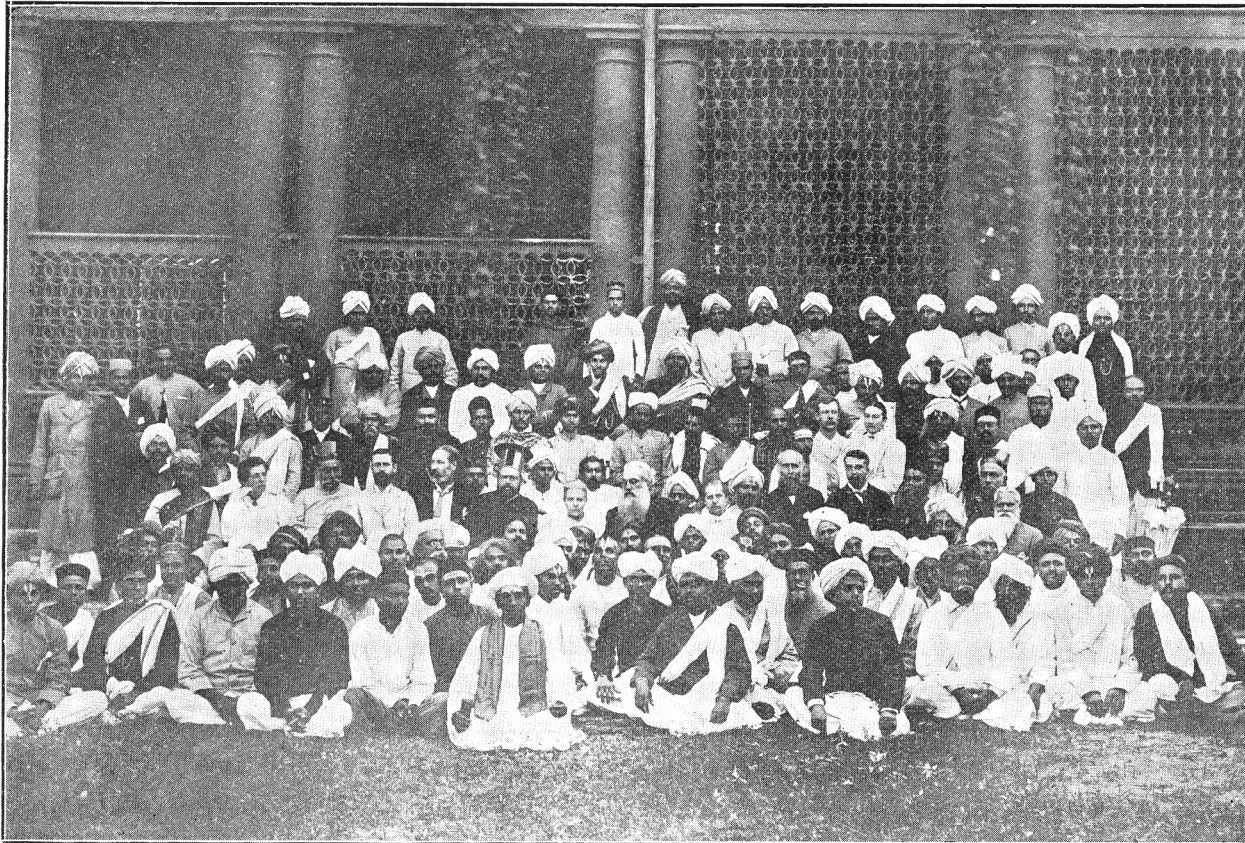


FIG. 139

MRS. BESANT'S FIRST CONVENTION IN INDIA, 1893

In the centre: Mrs. Besant, Colonel Olcott, Countess Wachtmeister.