Much ahead of her times: Annie Besant’s life and journalism as a framework for sustainable women empowerment model

Sudha Hegde

Department of Journalism, GFGC Kalasa, Kuvempu University, Shimoga, India and Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Karnatak University Dharwad, Dharwad, India

Abstract

**Purpose** – By studying Annie Besant’s leadership style as a transformational leader, women can learn how to effectively lead and empower themselves and others in their pursuits.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This qualitative study explores the potential of Annie Besant’s personality traits and leadership style to derive a model for sustainable women’s empowerment.

**Findings** – This study provides valuable insights into a potential framework for sustainable women empowerment based on Annie Besant’s personality traits and proposes a sustainable women empowerment model.

**Research limitations/implications** – This is a theoretical model represented in a graphical mode, the societal impact of the model is yet to be ascertained.

**Originality/value** – This article is an original concept inspired by the life of Annie Besant, an Irish woman of many virtues.

**Keywords** Women’s rights, Sustainable empowerment, Self-determination, Women leaders, Political rights

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Introduction

What are the traits of an empowered woman? Not a single trait like economic independence cannot determine empowerment. An empowered woman possesses the qualities of self-confidence, self-reliance, vision, courage, openness, perseverance, self-care and leadership. Most of the studies on women empowerment rely on quantifiable data, for example, increased participation of women in voting is concluded as they are becoming politically aware and active. However, it does not take into consideration how many women among them took their political decisions independently, without being influenced by their immediate male circle. Empowerment of women is a multidimensional process and is highly linked to social context.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to emphasize how traits such as independent thinking and decision-making are to be given importance in the process of women empowerment.

This study qualitatively analyzes Annie Besant’s life and works, examining her personal characteristics, beliefs and actions from the secondary data gathered from multiple sources, such as her writings, biographical accounts and historical records and this data is analyzed to
identify key traits and patterns of her personality which can provide a model for a new self-sustainable approach to women empowerment.

The analysis showed that Besant was uncompromising in terms of her thoughts and beliefs. Personal, institutional or governmental pressure did not have the power to break her resilience. Her untiring crusade against all odds in life without compromising her beliefs is worth studying and a profound study of her personality and deterministic power may open new possibilities in the models of women empowerment.

Different models of women empowerment and their limitations
The economic empowerment model emphasizes the importance of providing women with access to economic resources, including education, employment, credit and property rights (Malik, 2019). Studies have shown that economic empowerment can increase women’s bargaining power within the household, improve their social status and reduce their vulnerability to poverty and gender-based violence (Kabeer, 2015). However, the effectiveness of this model depends on a range of factors, such as the quality of education and employment opportunities, and the level of discrimination in the labour market (Malik, 2019). The Political Empowerment Model focuses on enhancing women’s participation in political decision-making processes, such as voting, running for office and influencing policy outcomes (Dovi, 2019). Political empowerment can help address gender-based disparities in representation, policy priorities and resource allocation (Krook, 2017). However, the success of this model depends on factors such as the quality of democracy, the existence of supportive institutions and the level of patriarchal norms (Dovi, 2019). The Educational Empowerment Model highlights the importance of providing women with access to quality education and ensuring their retention in schools (UNESCO, 2019). Education can help women develop critical thinking skills, improve their health outcomes and enhance their social and economic statuses (UNESCO, 2019). However, the effectiveness of this model depends on factors such as the quality of education, the existence of supportive policies and the level of social norms that prioritize boys’ education over girls’ (Lloyd, 2017).

Health Empowerment Model emphasizes the importance of promoting women’s health and well-being, including access to reproductive healthcare, maternal health services and mental health support (WHO, 2019). Addressing women’s health needs can help improve their overall quality of life, reduce their vulnerability to gender-based violence and enhance their economic productivity (WHO, 2019). However, the effectiveness of this model depends on factors such as the quality of healthcare services, the level of discrimination and stigma around women’s health issues and the level of political will to prioritize women’s health needs (Sen and Mukherjee, 2019). Human Rights Empowerment Model focuses on promoting and protecting women’s human rights, including their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (Charlesworth et al., 2019). Human rights empowerment can help challenge patriarchal norms, address gender-based discrimination and violence and promote gender equality (Charlesworth et al., 2019). However, the effectiveness of this model depends on factors such as the existence of supportive legal frameworks, the level of enforcement and accountability and the level of social norms that prioritize men’s rights over women’s rights (Sen and Mukherjee, 2019).

However, most of the models mentioned above have some inherent shortcomings. When an economically independent woman fails to assert her social or domestic rights or when a woman political leader needs to confirm with social norms, the very idea of empowerment falls short of comprehensiveness. In the contemporary history, we may come across many women achievers, but very few of them show all the traits of an empowered woman. Annie Besant is one among them who lived her life according to her terms in all areas of life, be it,
personal life, political, social or professional life. Hence, understanding her life and a deeper study into her personality may beget new perspectives of woman empowerment.

**Major international projects on sustainable women empowerment**

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Equality Strategy (2018–2021), the project aims to advance gender equality and women empowerment globally by promoting gender-responsive policies, inclusive decision-making, and access to resources and services. The strategy is designed to address the root causes of gender inequality and support women’s full participation in social, economic and political spheres. As a result of this initiative, significant progress has been made in reducing gender-based violence, increasing women’s political representation and improving women’s access to education and healthcare. The UNDP Gender Equality Strategy (2018–2021) serves as a framework for promoting gender equality and women empowerment, with the ultimate goal of creating a more just and equitable world for all (UNDP, 2018).

The World Bank’s Gender Action Plan (GAP) aimed to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment by addressing gender gaps in various sectors such as education, health and economic empowerment. The GAP focused on increasing women’s access to and control over resources, promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes and reducing gender-based violence. Through the GAP, the World Bank has implemented various programmes and projects that have shown positive results in promoting gender equality and women empowerment. These include initiatives that have improved women’s access to finance, education and health services, as well as efforts to promote women’s participation in political processes (World Bank, 2016).

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has conducted numerous research projects on gender equality and women’s empowerment worldwide. Their research has focused on a variety of topics, including women’s economic empowerment, health and well-being, gender-based violence and girls’ education. Through their research, ICRW has identified key barriers to gender equality and developed evidence-based solutions to promote women’s empowerment. Their work has contributed to policy and programme development at local, national and international levels and has helped to promote gender equality and empower women globally.

UN Women has been actively working towards gender equality and women’s empowerment by conducting research, developing policies and implementing programmes on a global scale. Their focus areas include economic empowerment, political participation, ending violence against women, and promoting women’s leadership and participation in decision-making processes. Through their initiatives, UN Women has contributed to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Their efforts have also helped to raise awareness about gender-based inequalities and inspire action towards creating a more equitable world for all.

Huerta and Branscombe (2019) conducted a study to explore the relationship between psychological empowerment, gender identity and well-being among women in the workplace. The study found that higher levels of psychological empowerment, which included feelings of competence, autonomy and self-determination, were associated with greater well-being among women. The study also highlighted the importance of considering gender identity in understanding the experiences of women in the workplace.

Lee and Park (2017) conducted a study on the relationship between personality traits and self-efficacy among women in leadership positions. The study found that women who had higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to exhibit personality traits such as openness, extraversion and agreeableness. These personality traits were positively associated with...
leadership effectiveness and job satisfaction. The study emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in developing leadership skills among women.

**Life and works of Annie Besant**

Annie Besant, a multifaceted personality and a political and social activist is an embodiment of independent thinking and self-reliance. Her life and works are the result of her quest to understand her inner calling and thoughts. Her life and achievements clearly indicate that empowerment is not possible without self-determination.

Since ancient times, many people who visited India had made it their home and rendered their service to its cause. One among them is Annie Besant. Born in 1847 in London, Annie was intellectually curious and sensitive. She was later married to a clergyman. However, the marriage did not last as she found her husband to be authoritarian and impulsive. When they broke out, Annie tried to take custody of her children but failed. She was introduced to Helena Blavatsky, a Ukrainian mystic and the principal thinker of the Theosophy and was influenced by it. Still, in England, she started her journalistic career and wrote in defence of women’s rights, advocated Home Rule in colonial countries and questioned the status of the Church of England (Ramaswami Aiyar, 1963). Earlier in times, there are plenty of examples before us where people who propagated ideas unacceptable to the Church were punished with death as happened in the case of Copernicus. In the wake of such incidents, it was very courageous on the part of Annie Besant to come openly against the Church and Monarch, without having any powerful support behind her.

Besant came to India in 1893 as a member of the Theosophical Society and became involved in Indian political and social life. Besant’s contributions to Indian society are multifaceted, ranging from journalism to politics, spirituality and women empowerment (Kumar and Pruthi, 1981). An analysis of her work in India in the above-mentioned areas and how she participated in the Indian Freedom Struggle as per her terms and thoughts provide insight into her self-deterministic personality. There was criticism against the political or religious philosophy held by Besant. However, one cannot deny the fact that in the male-dominated political and social platform, she never compromised with her beliefs and fought for what she considered good and correct.

**Annie Besant as a journalist and editor**

She started her journalistic career in India by launching a newspaper called “New India” in 1914. According to a study conducted by S. P. Arora, Annie Besant wrote over 1,000 articles in “New India” during her tenure as the editor of the newspaper from 1914 to 1920 (Arora, 1983). “New India” had a circulation of over 10,000 copies during its peak, making it one of the most widely read newspapers in India at the time (Chakravarty, 2012). According to a report by the Indian Press Committee in 1929, “New India” had a circulation of over 30,000, making it one of the most widely circulated newspapers in India. This popularity was partly due to Besant’s reputation as a social reformer and her association with the Indian National Congress. “Commonweal,” on the other hand, was a socialist journal that advocated for workers’ rights and trade unions. It was published in Madras in 1915, and Besant served as its editor. “Young India,” which was launched in 1919, focused on promoting Indian nationalism and was aimed at the youth. She wrote extensively on women’s rights, advocating for their education and political participation. Her writings were instrumental in changing the perception of women’s roles in Indian society.

A special trait about Annie Besant’s journalism was she used her publications to float new ideas about self-governance, how India should be prepared for Home Rule, what kind of
constitution it should have, what should be the educational framework and many other future issues India might face. She was preparing the ground for future self-rule through her publications. In this regard also, Besant’s journalistic practise was distinctive of others.

**Imprisonment of Annie Besant**
Annie Besant was imprisoned three times for her activism and advocacy for Indian rights. Annie Besant spent a total of 15 months in prison for her activism and advocacy for Indian rights (Chakravarty, 2012). In 1921, Besant was arrested and imprisoned for six months for her involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement, a movement led by Mahatma Gandhi that aimed to boycott British goods and institutions in India (McLane, 2016). Annie Besant’s imprisonment was a testament to her dedication and commitment to the Indian independence movement. As there were fair chances for Besant to avoid being imprisoned, she chose not to lessen her fight and served the prison terms.

**Impact on Indian politics**
Annie Besant was a key figure in the Indian independence movement. In comparison to other women leaders of that time, such as Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Besant’s activism focused on a wider range of issues, including spirituality and philosophy. Despite facing multiple imprisonments, she continued to advocate for Indian rights and played a key role in shaping the Indian nationalist movement. In her presidential address, during the 32nd session of the Indian National Congress, not only she provided a model for India’s self-rule but also visionary plans for the future (Bama, 2019). Besant was a co-founder of the All-India Home Rule League, which aimed to promote self-rule for India. She led the league’s activities in Madras and worked to mobilize support for Indian independence.

**Contributions to Women’s empowerment**
Annie Besant was a strong advocate for women’s education and played a key role in establishing the Banaras Hindu University, which provided education to women in India (Besant, 1916). Besant fought for women’s rights and played a crucial role in the passage of the Age of Consent Act in 1891, which raised the age of consent for marriage from 10 to 12 years old for girls (Roy, 2007). Besant also worked to empower women by promoting their employment opportunities. She established the Women’s Indian Association, which aimed to improve the status of women in Indian society and promote their economic independence (Bhattacharya, 2012). In 1925, Besant played a crucial role in the Temple Entry Movement, which aimed to end the practice of barring Dalits and women from entering Hindu temples. Besant led a campaign to allow Dalits and women to enter the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, which resulted in a historic victory (Chakravarty, 2012). Annie Besant established over 100 schools in India to provide education to women and promote their empowerment. Besant established several women’s organizations, including the Women’s Indian Association, which aimed to promote women’s rights and economic independence (Bhattacharya, 2012). Besant’s efforts towards women’s suffrage in India were instrumental in raising awareness of the issue and pushing for change. Her advocacy also inspired other women to speak up and demand their rights (Besant, 1917, p. 205). She established several schools and colleges for women, including the Central Hindu College for Women in Benares (now Varanasi) in 1904. Besant also founded the National Girls’ School in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1906, which provided education to girls from different backgrounds and religions. She also
advocated for reforms in the education system, including the inclusion of women’s history and literature in the curriculum (Gupta, 2017). Besant believed that women needed to be educated not only in academic subjects but also in subjects that would enable them to participate fully in society and advocate for their rights (Singh, 2012). There are a few people like Annie Besant who worked tirelessly in several fronts of social reforming. She also campaigned for the abolition of the Devadasi system, which forced young girls into prostitution in the name of religion. Besant’s efforts helped to bring these issues to the forefront and paved the way for further reforms aimed at improving the lives of women in India.

Discussion
As per the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 of the World Economic Forum, India ranks 135 out of 146 countries, which clearly shows that India has much to do in terms of gender equality and equity. Considering this, what Annie Besant has done in India, a century ago, is highly noteworthy. In her personal life as well as in public life, Annie Besant took decisions according to her perspectives about life. Annie Besant actively advocated for Indian independence and home rule, which put her at odds with British colonial authorities and the British establishment. Besant’s leadership of the Theosophical Society, with its unconventional spiritual practices, was viewed by some as controversial and heretical. She faced strong criticism for supporting paganism and idolatry in the name of theosophism for which she gave no importance. Her feminist activism, involvement in various political and social movements, and unconventional personal life also made her a target for criticism and scandal. Despite these challenges, Besant remained committed to her principles and had a lasting impact on Indian society through her work in the domain of journalism, politics, women empowerment and spirituality. And she received criticism also for her strong advocacy for women’s rights. However, she continuously worked to break the barriers that held the women back and motivated them to take control of their lives.

Sustainable women empowerment is a crucial goal for creating a just and equal society. It is only possible when women are brought up with the competencies and skills of self-determination. When women have the power to make decisions about all aspects of their lives, they achieve real empowerment. True empowerment requires not only access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities but also the ability to make choices about one’s own life, without fear of discrimination, harassment or violence. When women are empowered in this way, they can contribute to society as equals and achieve their full potential. Sustainable women empowerment is a key factor in creating a more just and equitable world, where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

UNPO declaration on self-determination
In August 2020, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) adopted a resolution calling for the international community to recognize instances over the past six years where self-determination issues have been freely voted on. The resolution emphasizes the importance of self-determination as a fundamental human right and a critical step towards achieving UN SDG 16. Goal 16 aims to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies, and the UNPO asserts that the right to self-determination is essential for achieving this goal. Without the promotion of self-determination, the UNPO believes that the true implementation of all other human rights and the creation of an effective global order capable of addressing global issues are not possible (UNPO, 2020).
Self-determination: theoretical framework
Self-Determination Theory is a widely recognized theory developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) that emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness in fostering self-determination. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to be self-determined when their basic psychological needs for autonomy (feeling in control), competence (feeling capable) and relatedness (feeling connected to others) are fulfilled (Deci and Ryan, 1985). This theory suggests that creating environments that support these needs can enhance self-determination. Empowerment theory, developed by Rappaport (1984), emphasizes the importance of power, control and participation in fostering self-determination. The theory suggests that empowering individuals involves enhancing their sense of control over their lives, providing opportunities for participation and decision-making, and addressing structural and social barriers that limit their autonomy and agency (Rappaport, 1984). Strengths-based approaches focus on identifying and building on individuals' strengths, resources and capabilities to promote self-determination. These approaches emphasize empowering individuals by recognizing and valuing their existing skills and capacities, rather than solely focusing on deficits or problems (Saleebey, 2006).

Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) conducted a study on the role of autonomy-supportive parenting in cultivating self-determination in adolescents. The findings revealed that parents who offered support for their child’s autonomy provided a rationale for rules, acknowledged their child’s feelings and opinions and fostered higher levels of self-determination in their children. All these studies show that self-determination can be inculcated in humans using scientific studies and approaches.

Sustainable women empowerment model
Hence, keeping self-determination as the central idea and deriving inspiration from the life of Annie Besant, a sustainable women development model has been developed (Figure 1).

Regressive patriarchal attitudes and entrenched social norms continue to permeate Indian society, perpetuating gender stereotypes and imposing constraints on women’s mobility and freedom of choice. Extensive research conducted in India reveals that even educated and financially independent women have tragically resorted to suicide as a result of dowry harassment (Deccan Herald, 2017, 5 October). These studies shed light on the persistent challenges faced by educated women and the enduring prevalence of dowry-related issues, despite advancements in education (Vohra et al., 2020; Gupta, 2017). In contemporary India, numerous educated and employed women encounter societal norms and restrictions that impede their personal lives, rendering them unable to make decisions that would enhance their physical and emotional well-being. Social identity theory posits that women may prioritize relational aspects of their identities, such as their roles as mothers, daughters and sisters, which can influence their decision-making (Mohanty, 2018). Moreover, within Indian society, where honour culture remains deeply entrenched, many girls grow up burdened with the immense emotional and social responsibility of safeguarding their family’s honour (Mohanty, 2018).

The limitations imposed on women’s decision-making and agency can hinder their ability to make independent choices. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on cultivating the necessary competencies and skills in the upbringing of girls, enabling them to think autonomously and assert their right to self-determination. India has implemented several national policies and frameworks aimed at supporting the upbringing of girls, such as the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child and Educate the Girl Child) campaign, the National Policy for Education, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, and the Right to Education Act. These policies have the potential to address gender disparities and empower girls, granting them the freedom to exercise self-determination. This approach is expected to yield...
positive outcomes for girls’ well-being across various domains and foster equality and equity within society.

In addition to the aforementioned initiatives, it is essential for policymakers, parents and schools to integrate self-determination theories into the formulation of policies that aim to empower girl children. By incorporating these theories, policymakers can develop guidelines that prioritize fostering autonomy, competence and relatedness in girls’ upbringing, thereby enabling them to exercise their right to self-determination and promoting their overall empowerment. This approach ensures that policies are grounded in evidence-based principles and effectively support the development of independent thinking and decision-making skills among girl children.

The quality of self-determination has played a significant role in shaping Annie Besant’s unwavering beliefs across personal, professional and political domains. Furthermore, extensive research demonstrates that self-determination is a crucial factor in achieving sustainable empowerment. These findings, coupled with studies that reveal effective strategies for cultivating self-determination in individuals, provide a foundation for nations and societies to develop targeted measures aimed at fostering self-determination among women. By harnessing this knowledge, policymakers and stakeholders can work towards empowering women sustainably and realize the goal of achieving comprehensive women empowerment.

**Conclusion**

Several studies have documented Annie Besant’s contributions to various fields, but very few attempts have been made to sketch the independent and fearless woman inside her who found her own path which can be a model for empowering women from the inside. More studies can be done to ascertain whether just providing access to amenities and facilities will produce women who are self-reliant.
In this regard, an in-depth panel discussion can be conducted with experts in the fields of women’s empowerment and sustainable development, as well as individuals who have knowledge of Annie Besant’s life and works. A focus group of women from diverse backgrounds to discuss their perceptions of Annie Besant and how her personality could inform a self-sustainable model of women empowerment can be conveyed and this would involve facilitating group discussions and recording the ideas and opinions that emerge. Besant’s leadership style as a transformational leader who communicated effectively, inspired others and collaborated with others can provide insights into how women can effectively lead and empower others in their own pursuits.

In this way, a deeper study of the personality traits of independent thinkers who were ahead of their times like Annie Besant may provide a new perspective on woman empowerment. Annie Besant’s views on women’s equality and rights were much ahead of her time (Nagarajan, 2018). Annie Besant’s life and work serve as an excellent source for deriving models that enable women to achieve long-term self-reliance and success.

References


Further reading

Corresponding author
Sudha Hegde can be contacted at: susanhegde@gmail.com

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