



Maria Montessori

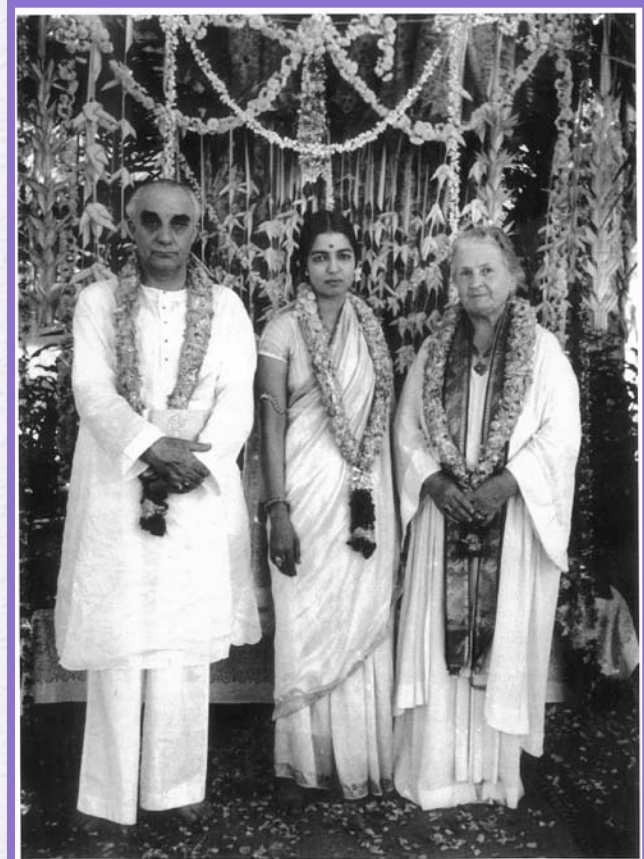
The India Years



At the age of 69, “Maria Montessori began one of the most interesting and important phases of her already remarkable life” (Standing, 1957, p. 70).

The Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society of India extended an invitation to the Montessoris to journey to India and give lectures and training courses. The Second World War had broken out and Dr. Montessori was forced into exile from Italy because of her liberal and antifascist views. Montessori accepted the invitation and reached India in 1939.



The Arundales with Dr. Montessori

With the Arundales



Dr. George Sidney Arundale and Rukmini Devi with Dr. Montessori and Mario

Searching....

In December 2009, I visited the South of India as the final stage of my Montessori pilgrimage. I came looking for a deeper understanding of how and why Montessori developed the spiritual dimension to her method and her vision of cosmic education. I had read that the inspiration for both had come from this lush region that tumbles down into the Indian Ocean.

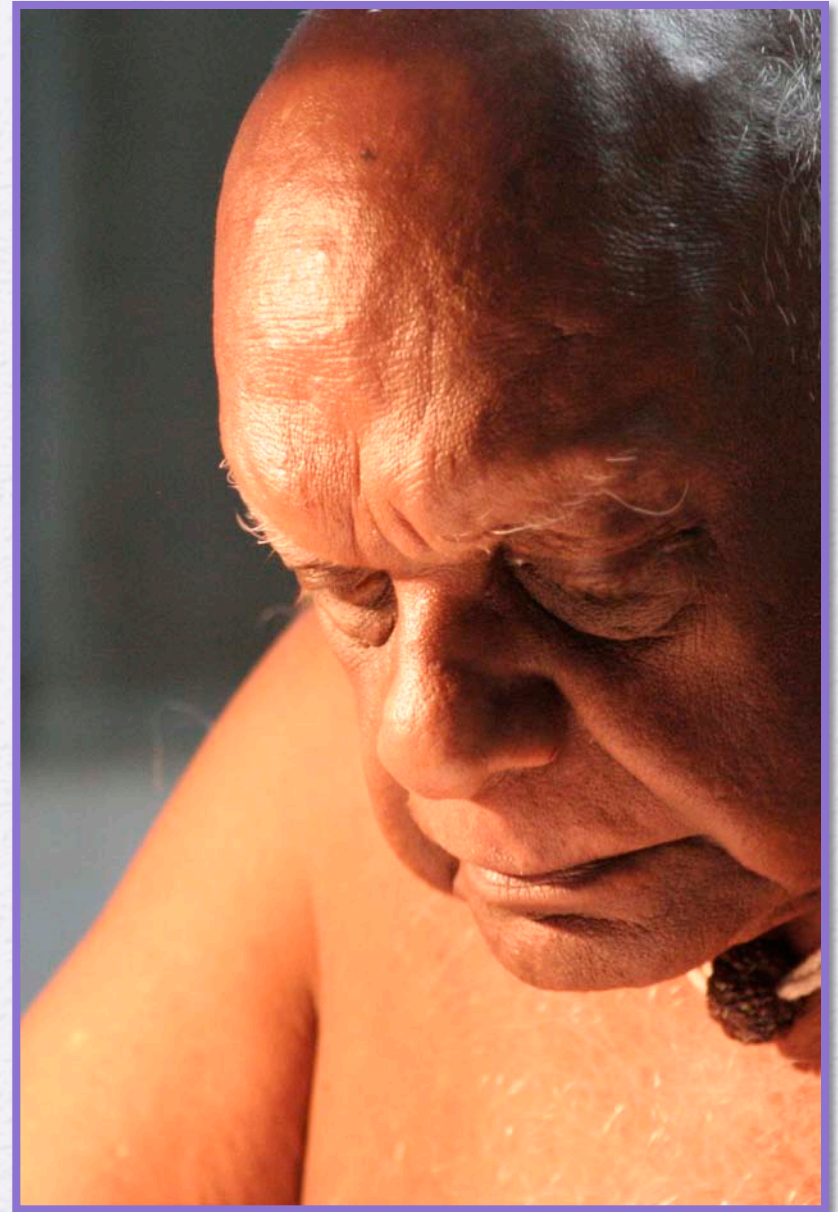
Mario Montessori sums up the significance of their stay in India:

- *“Looking back on the chequered life of Dr. Montessori...there is a period that looks above the others for its dramatic nature and for the completion she attained in her vast vision...India could be compared to a united Europe for the diversity of people, language and mentality that compose the vast country...So we had the privilege of coming in prolonged contact with children in all situations...The children were our universal ambassadors to all...And in my heart the light of India steadily warms the sense of gratitude for the country which showed so great a regard for Dr. Montessori, surrounded her with friendship, and gave her the support and collaboration of selflessly devoted students.” (The Impact of India)*

‘An august welcome...’

I was fortunate to have met Mr. C. Nachiappan, founder of Kalakshetra Publications (the first publishers of Montessori texts) and a strong supporter of the Montessori movement.

We had a long chat during which he told me that Dr. Montessori had been received with “such an august welcome only given to very few people in those days”.



Mr. Nachiappan

Nachiappan had been at the airport and witnessed the arrival of the Montessoris in Chennai: “She arrived in Madras via Bombay in November 1939. She came on a mail plane that was personally piloted by JRD Tata... Children were lined up along both sides of the road and waving out to her.” Later, since he knew how to drive a car, he was in charge of driving Montessori around Chennai.



The Theosophical Society



The Theosophical Society is nested within 250 acres of vibrant green trees and plants.



The Banyan tree



The 500 year old Banyan tree under which Montessori is known to have held discourses with many notable personalities. The parent tree is now dead but the ‘babies’ sprawl over a huge area and I found that very symbolic.

I was amazed at the diversity of nature here and the serenity and solitude it provided. Away from the noise of the city and people, this was a sanctuary and I found myself at once at peace in this tranquility. I thought of Montessori and what this place must have done for her away from the wars that the Western world was fighting.

Mallai

In honor of my teacher, I hung a 'mallai' on the tree: in the south of India, the flower garland or 'mallai' is presented to gods and people of honor. In quite a few pictures of Maria Montessori at this time, she is wearing the 'mallai' along with the 'angavastham" (also given as a symbol of honor).



We were given a brief introduction to the aims of the Theosophical Society and immediately I could see similarities with the Montessori Philosophy: respect for all things; freedom of thought, and development of latent potentialities in individuals.





Olcott Bungalow

The Montessoris lived in the Olcott Bungalow
which is nested in the Theosophical Society.

Olcott Bungalow

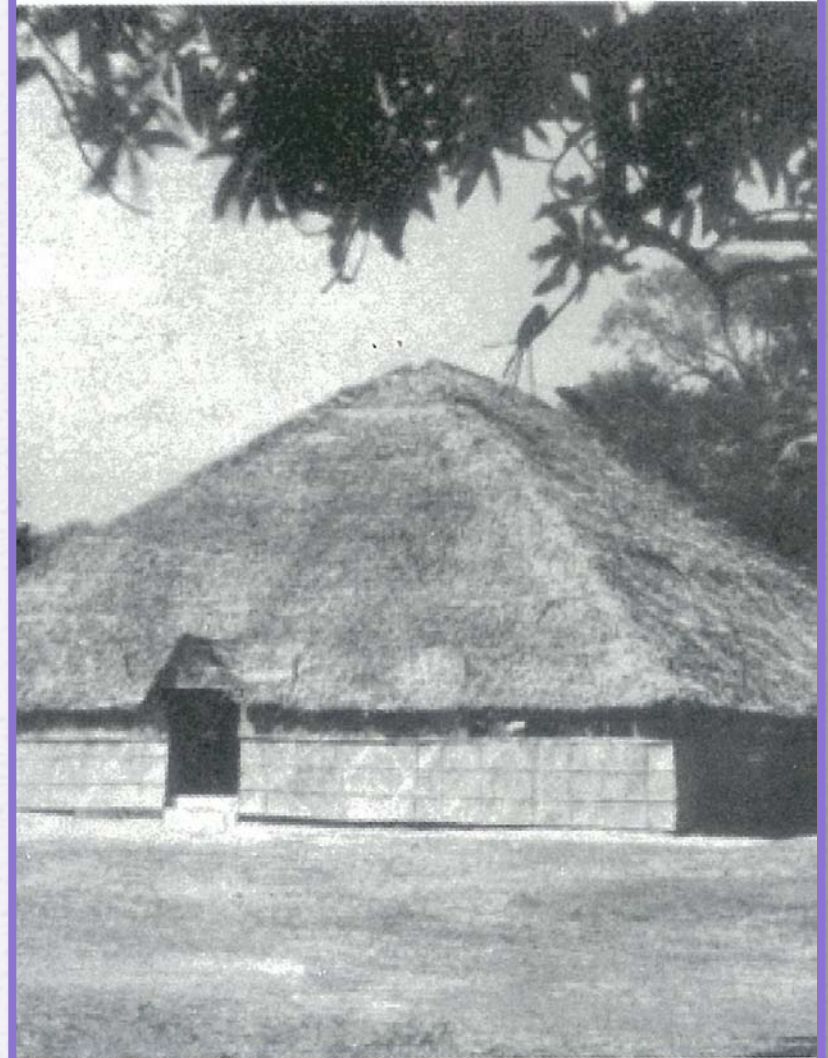


The grounds of the Olcott Bungalow where the first course was held.



Lecture hall

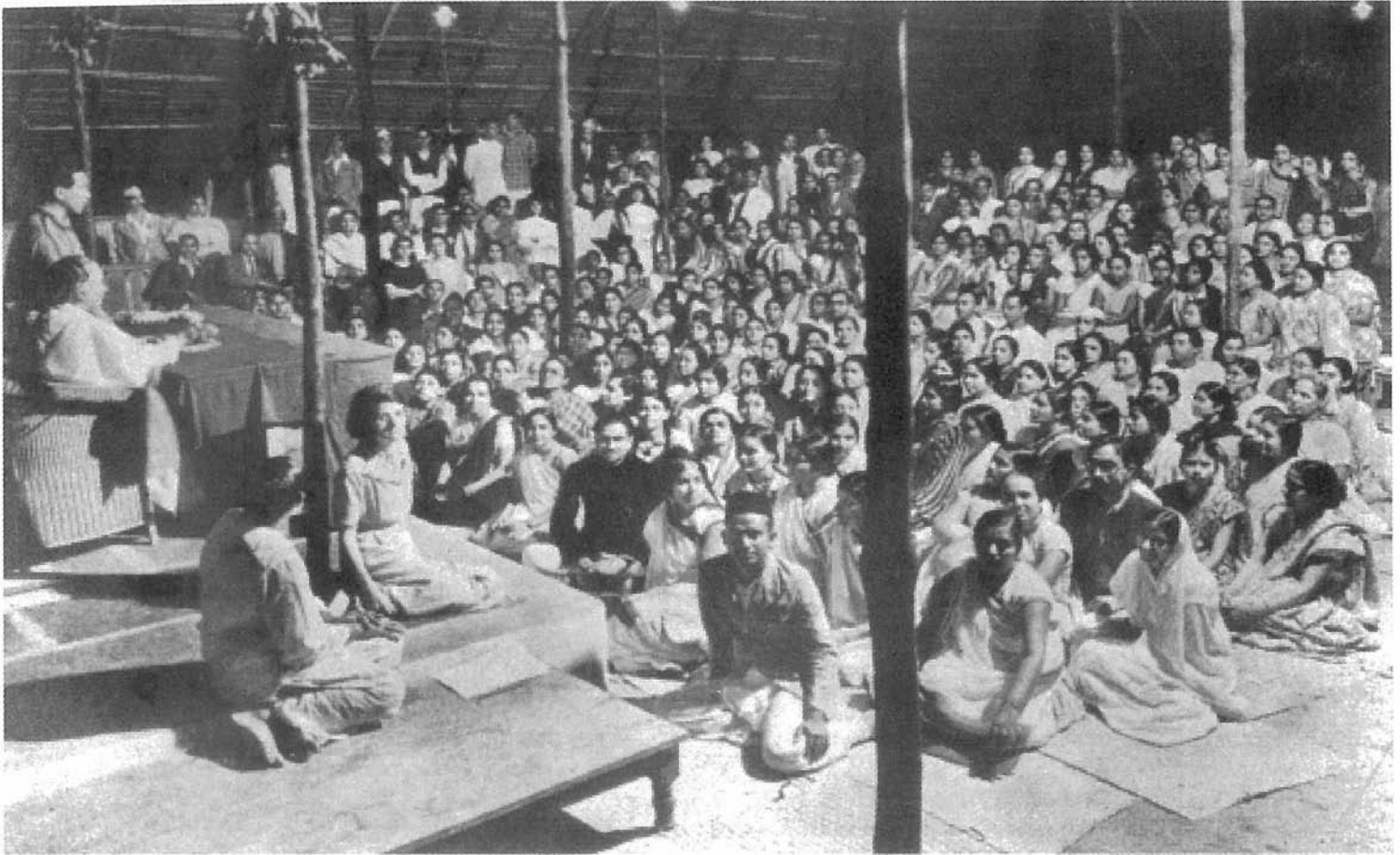
I was told that thatched huts were constructed here to house the 350 students that came to attend the course and the largest of them was used as the lecture hall.



The thatched Shed where the course was held in 1939

With the Arundales at the opening of the course



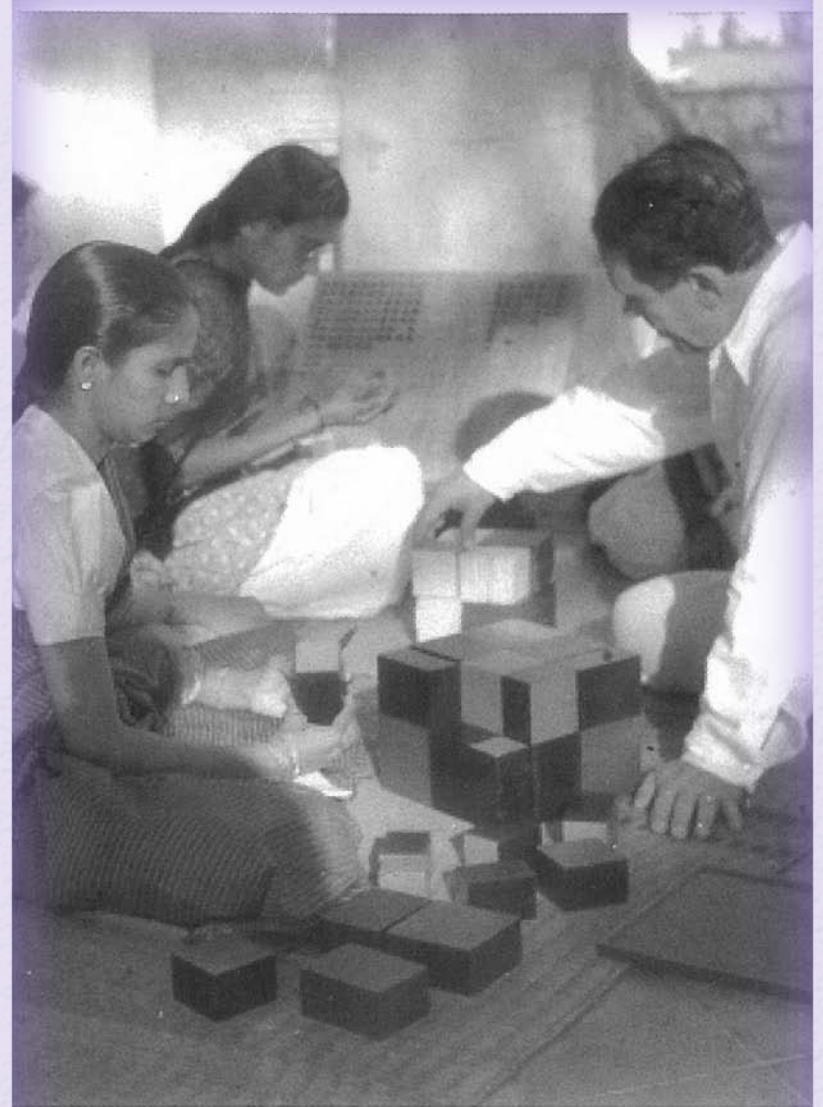


A view of the lecture hall where madam concluded her course



A view of the hall with all the students of the course

“ Madam had beautiful hands with which she demonstrated her materials.” Mr. Nachiappan further explained that Montessori’s lectures were translated into English by Mario: the translation was done after every few lines. Dr. Montessori paid very close attention to the translation and whenever Mario fumbled for words, it was Montessori that provided the suitable English expression!



Montessori, Senior with the course students during 1939

Sitting in the same spot in the Olcott Bungalow!



The Olcott Bungalow is grand with gigantic Roman pillars that once had a great view of the Bay of Bengal.



A grand staircase leads to the first floor



I imagined Maria Montessori in a white “very loose-fitting full-length gown ...walking up and down most of the time in the open balcony of the bungalow.”



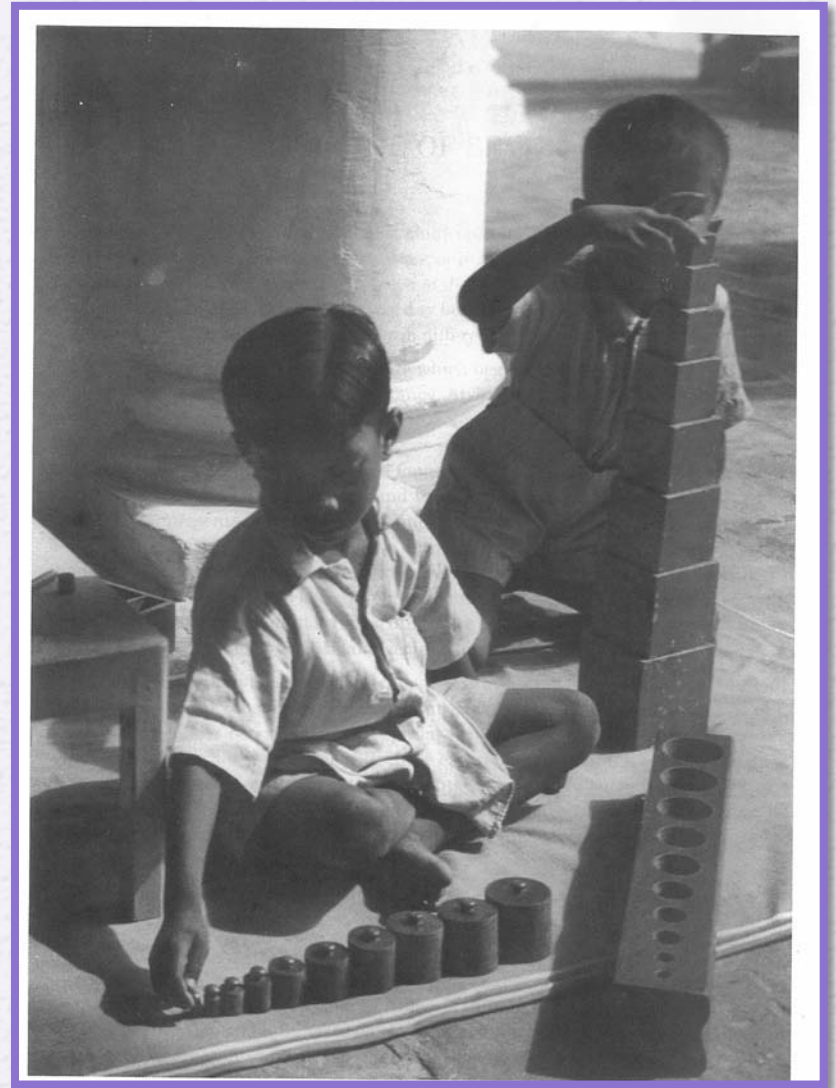


Ground floor of the Olcott Bungalow

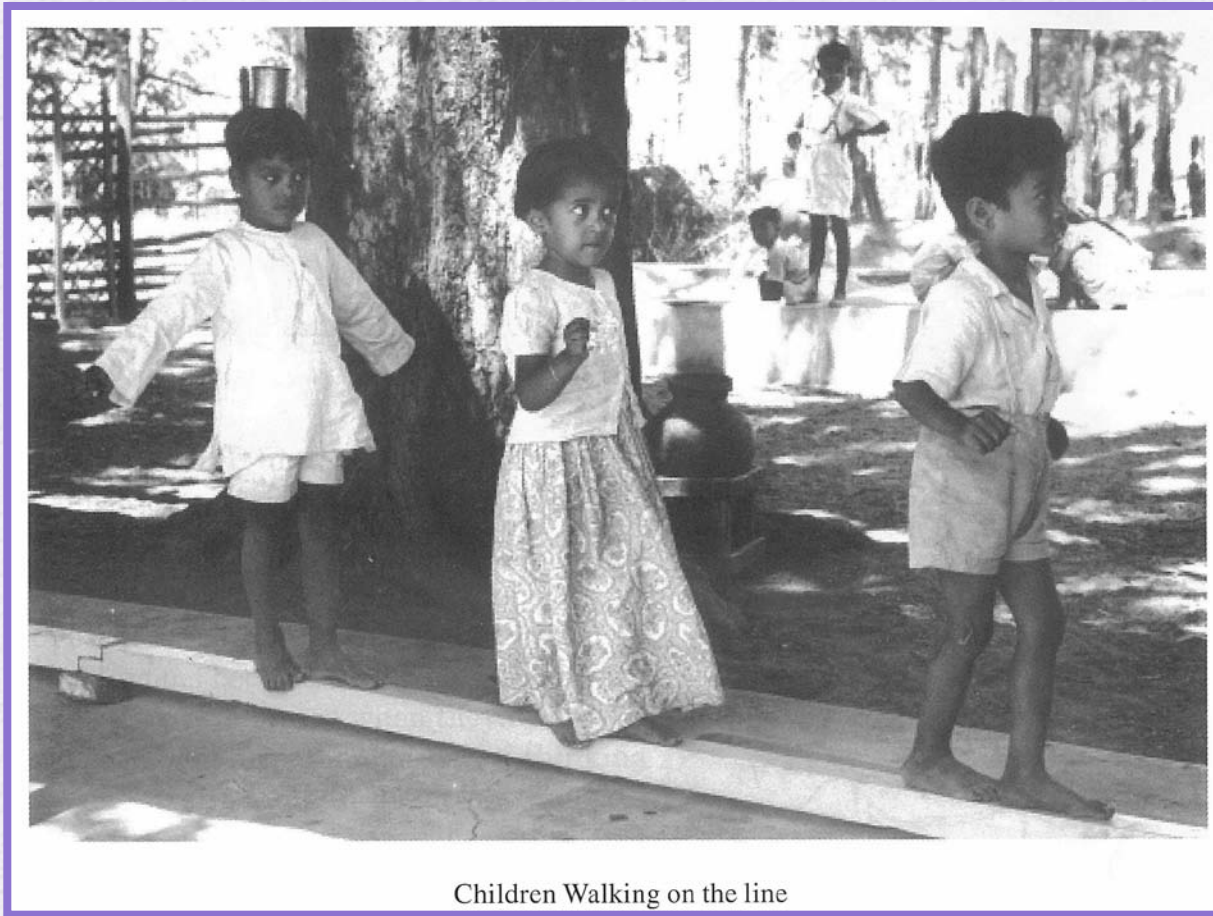


The observatory

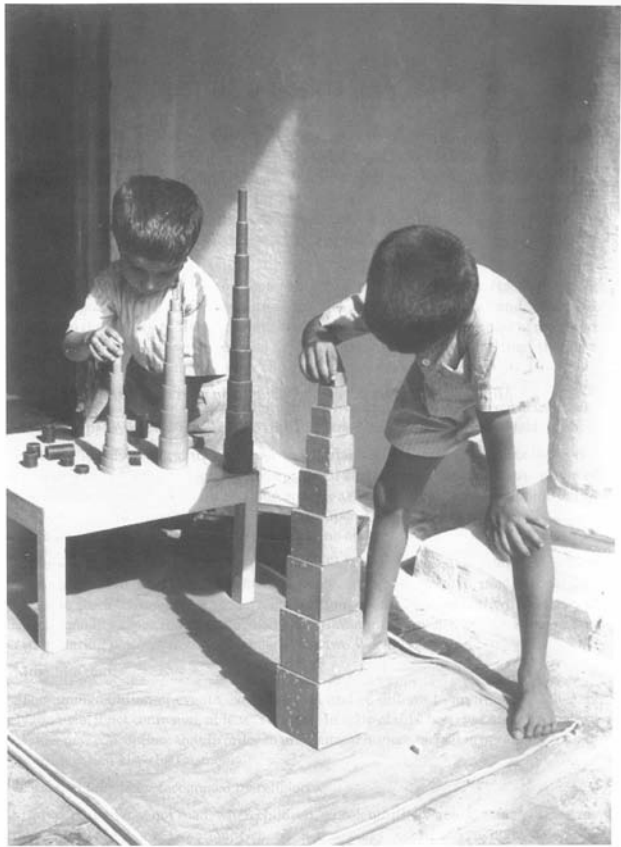
When Montessori asked for a school to be opened so she could observe children at work, the ground floor of the Olcott Bungalow was converted into a Montessori school. It was called the observatory. I was fortunate enough to have met a couple of people who went to this school.



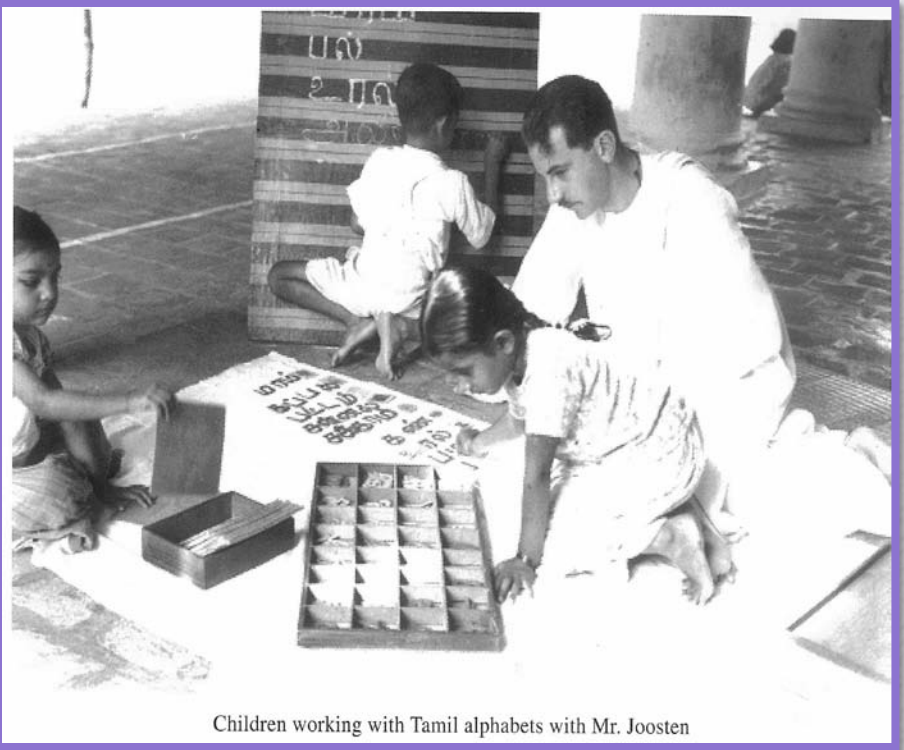
Children walking on the line



Children Walking on the line



Children working with Montessori Materials



Children working with Tamil alphabets with Mr. Joosten





Children in Montessori School "Story Telling"



Kalakshetra Center

India at its cultural best, bringing together
traditional dance, theatre, music and art.

At Kalakshetra, I was fascinated by the simplicity, dedication and the relationship between the teacher and the students. I thought of how this place must have influenced Maria Montessori. She speaks of beauty in the classroom as something that is simple and harmonious, not luxurious, and always of respect for the environment and the people in it. Was this the beginning of the spiritual aspect of her teacher training? Could it also be that the idea of the Erdkinder and cosmic education took root here? It well may have been.





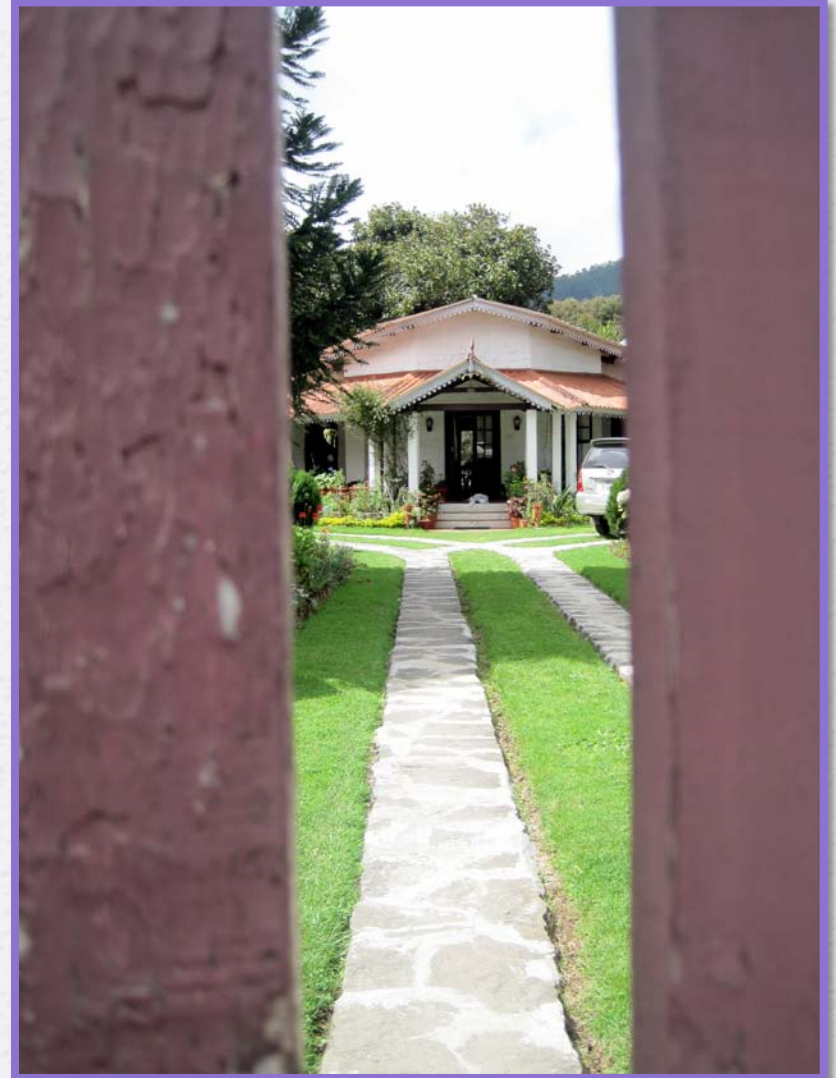
Kodaikanal

The birth of cosmic education
1942-1944

Rose Bank



When the Theosophical Society became the headquarters of the army, the Montessoris were shifted to a hill station called Kodaikanal. Mario wrote about the house (Rose bank): “We found a house which met our needs, with a minimum of stairs, a fireplace, a garden in the front, and a garden in back. The garden in the front was on the same level as the house.” We found a house which met our needs, with a minimum of stairs, a fireplace, a garden in the front, and a garden in back. The garden in the front was on the same level as the house.”





Mario Montessori described in an interview with David Kahn: “We had made a new discovery which was special and long-lasting, and it all came about in the hills at Kodaikanal, where practice and ideas met – and a better vision emerged.”

