

# **“The Light of India: A Twinkle in the Eye”**

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I have been told I need to meet Raji teacher.

Before I know it, an older woman ushers me into a small red car and we careen down the back alleys of Chennai, India. We arrive at a garden-level flat where two grinning women in earthy silk saris and jasmine flowers dangling from their hair greet us. Immediately, these three women are gossiping and giggling like school girls in the playground as they recall their encounters with a woman they call ‘Madam’.

For the rest of us, we know ‘Madam’ with the slightly more formal title of Dr. Maria Montessori.

I am here in the south of India as the final stage of my Montessori pilgrimage. I have been involved in Montessori education since 1984 and have since traveled to many significant Montessori sites in Italy and the Netherlands. As a lifelong learner of the Montessori philosophy, I am looking for a deeper understanding of how and why Montessori developed the spiritual dimension to her method and her vision of cosmic education. I have read that the inspiration for both had come from this lush region that tumbles down into the Indian Ocean.

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

I was watching the three women’s animated faces without really listening when suddenly my ears perked up. They were reminiscing about the time they were asked to assemble a guard of honor for

Montessori and her son. Their voices swelled with pride as they recounted how children stood waving on both sides of the road from the gates of the Theosophical Society to the Olcott Bungalow.

Earlier in the day I had met Mr. C. Nachiappan, founder of Kalakshetra Publications (the first publishers of Montessori texts) and a strong supporter of the Montessori movement, who had told me that Dr. Montessori had been received with “such an august welcome only given to very few people in those days”. He 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.” Every Indian knows JRD Tata: he was one of the most enterprising Indian entrepreneurs and built the largest industrial house of India! The fact that he personally flew the Montessoris to Madras (now Chennai) makes it quite obvious that her arrival in India was a matter of huge significance and that she was greeted as a very special guest. Nachiappan continued to describe the event, “Children were lined up along both sides of the road and waving out to her.”

The Theosophical Society is nested within 250 acres of vibrant green trees and plants, including a 500 year old banyan tree, under which Montessori is known to have held discourses with many notable personalities. As we walked along the grounds towards the banyan tree, I was amazed at the diversity of nature 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.

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. The banyan tree was amazing: the parent tree is now dead but the rest of the tree sprawls around a huge area. 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).

The three women continued to reminisce about 'Madam' and her son. They chatter about what beautiful human beings they both were and how they genuinely cared about their students. One of the ladies excitedly recalls how she had visited Mario Montessori in Amsterdam many years later and how touched she was that he remembered her and made it a point to ask about many of his students in India. It was also clear that school with the Montessoris was a lot of fun as they discuss the time line "that was more than a furlong long...we started unrolling it from the gate..." and that taught them how civilization evolved. Happily they remembered "how we went on long walks to collect leaves and then we dried them and studied them". They spoke proudly about their standard math exams in which they chose questions that no one else attempted because Mario had made math so much fun and they found it very easy.

We then drove to the Olcott Bungalow and were shown the grounds in which the first course was held in 1939. 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. Dr. Montessori lectured in Italian and I asked Bhuvna, who had taken the training under Montessori, if this was a problem? She explained that although Montessori did not lecture in English, she certainly knew the language. Once she had heard Montessori speak in English and questioned her about her knowledge of the language. To this Montessori replied with a twinkle in her eye, "Only know Italian...very convenient!" 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! Besides, Bhuvna elaborated; she must have known English well for she corrected all their albums. What I would not give to hear her speak or watch her give a presentation or two! “Madam had beautiful hands with which she demonstrated her materials.” Nachiappan said.

It was hard for me to believe that I was standing in the place that had housed my teacher during World War II; first in the school that had been used as an observatory and practical training school for the Montessoris and the participants in the course and then in their residential quarters. The Olcott Bungalow is grand with gigantic Roman pillars that once had a great view of the Bay of Bengal. 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.” Bhuvna said. What had she been thinking as she lived in this foreign country that showered her with respect and strived to meet all of her needs? Did she miss the way of life she was used to? Or was she so absorbed in studying the universal “bambino” that it did not matter to her where she was?

The conversation between the three women stirred me towards an answer to these questions: both Montessori and Mario were focused on education and studying the child. “Madam pointed at the child, but the problem today is that most of the people are looking at their fingers and not at what they were pointing at – the child,” Bhuvana said. She went on to emphasize how important it is not to lose focus on the child: “Always think of the child.” she advised.

Close to the grounds of the Theosophical Society is the Kalakshetra Center which I also visited. What a place of quiet, beauty and simplicity. It is truly India at its cultural best, bringing together traditional dance, theatre, music and art. It reminded me of my visit to *Shanktinektan*

(‘abode of peace’) many years ago. It was here that Rabindranath Tagore started a school whose central premise was that learning in a natural environment was more enjoyable and meaningful. I have never forgotten the idyllic existence and experience of watching students taking classes in the outdoors. 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.

Mario Montessori summed up the significance of their stay in India saying, *“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.”* I feel fortunate that I was able to meet some of the people that supported the Montessoris during their stay in India, share photographs with them and gain personal insights. As we were leaving, the ladies continued reminiscing and now Raji teacher was talking of how they had only one chair in their home and out of respect it was reserved for ‘Madam’. In fact it was called the ‘Madam Montessori chair’.

## References

Montessori, M. *“The Impact of India.”* (Reprinted The NAMTA Journal Spring 1998).

Standing, E. M. (1957). *Maria Montessori: Her life and work.* New York: Plume.

