

The Light of *India*

A Twinkle in the Eye

by Punum Bhatia

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 schoolgirls in the playground as they recall their encounters with a woman they call ‘Madam.’ The rest of us know ‘Madam’ by 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 Dr. Montessori and her son, Mario, to journey to India 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 anti-fascist 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 nestled 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 chattered 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 discussed 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 ques-

tions 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 who 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 Mario translated Montessori’s lectures into English: 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, 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

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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.” What had she been thinking as she lived in this foreign country that showered her with respect and strived to meet all

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.

Safety and Salvation in Kodaikanal: The Birth of Cosmic Education

“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.”
(Mario Montessori, 1998, p. 42)



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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

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 that 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 who 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 then Raji talked 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.’

Having visited the Olcott Bungalow in Chennai and seen for myself where Maria Montessori had lived during the Second World War, I was now keen to visit Kodaikanal, the birthplace of cosmic education.

When the Theosophical Society became the headquarters of the army, the Montessoris were shifted to a hill station called Kodaikanal. There was growing concern regarding Maria Montessori’s health, and the Theosophical Society took the responsibility of moving the Montessoris to “a higher place where there was a better climate” (Montessori, 1998, p. 35.) Mario Montessori 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.”
(1998, p. 35)

Kodaikanal is a tiny mountaintop town known for its rugged beauty with wooded slopes, gorgeous waterfalls and the beautiful Kodai Lake. It is also renowned for its educational institutions of international repute. About 325 miles from Chennai, it takes approximately nine hours over winding roads to get to Kodaikanal.

The cooler weather and the scenic beauty must have provided a welcome change to Maria Montessori, but she missed the cultural and political bustle of Chennai. She was no longer training teachers and had no opportunities to work with little children. As she said to her student, Lena Wikramaratne, who had followed her to Kodaikanal:

“What can I do here? I can’t give a course; all I can do if you come to me in the evenings is talk and show you some material.” (2013, p. 86)

It is during this period and under these circumstances that cosmic education was born. Deprived of the Montessori didactic apparatus to begin with, Mario Montessori and Lena Wikamaratne used nature as their teaching tools. As Ms. Wikamaratne describes:

“We used to go together and pick the moss and marsh plants and come back and make the terrariums and aquariums. We used to bring samples from nature and keep them to let the children see the different ways of life.” (2013, p. 87)

Mario Montessori expands:

“So we created these terrariums to show the collaboration between plants and animals. We would catch one animal at a time, observe them in our constructed surroundings and then return them to nature after a while. When the curiosity of the children seemed satisfied, we would move on to a different animal and a different concept.” (1998, p. 37)



It was the Kodaikanal experience that generated the theosophical vision of universal unity and the interdependency that exists in nature. It was here that so many of the materials that we use to teach today (botany, the story of the universe, geography charts) were created and I was keen to see the place where it all began.

However, other than the fact that the Montessoris had resided in a bungalow called “Rose Bank” in Kodaikanal, I had no other information. I did not have the address or any milestone (in India this is a very common way of telling people where you live!). So, when we decided to make the drive to Kodaikanal, we were not certain we would find the bungalow. There could have been so many things that might have changed since 1942, amongst them being that the house might have been renamed or demolished.

Our driver was not very optimistic but humored me by saying that there was

no point worrying about it at the start of our journey. When we got there, we would see! As we drove into Kodaikanal, the beauty of the surroundings was truly mesmerizing. I was happy to be away from the heat and pollution of Chennai and could see why this place is often called the “Princess of Hill Stations.” Our hotel is situated on Kodai Lake, and the beauty of the rolling clouds and serenity of the water takes my breath away.

However, my first point of business here is to find “Rose Bank.” I head into the hotel and, before checking in, I ask the concierge in a most hesitating way if he knows where “Rose Bank” might be. He shakes his head *no*, not knowing how upset this was making me, but points to the manager’s office and suggests I ask him. The manager has been here longer than he has I am told. I promptly make my way to the manager’s office and ask my question again, hoping against hope. To my surprise and delight, he nods, *yes*. I could have hugged him, but he is a



formal Indian gentleman and, in hindsight, I am glad I did not. He asks me, in a most polite manner, if I have a driver and tells me to fetch him so he can give him directions. Much head nodding follows as directions are exchanged in Tamil, and my driver asks me if I am ready to go. As we get into the car, even my driver is smiling.

The roads are hilly as we make our way to “Rose Bank.” Suddenly, the car stops and I am told, “We are here.” As I look outside the car window, I see the gate to the house with the sign reading “Rose Bank.” We ring the doorbell, and the housemaid opens the gate just a fraction. Through this, she talks to the driver in Tamil. I am told that the ‘masters’ of the house have gone to the Club and she does not have their permission to open the gate. I resort to begging her to let me in just a little so I can see my teacher’s house and take a photograph or two. I promise her I will be quick. She obliges most reluctantly.

There are flowers everywhere! The house is exactly as Mario Montessori had described it. The garden in the front led to a few stairs, which I climbed to get into the house and see the fireplace and then through the house to the back garden. I could scarcely believe I was standing in the place that had guided my teacher’s thinking towards the nature of the relationships among all living things—what we now call cosmic education. As Mario Montessori acknowledges:

“It was at Kodaikanal where Dr. Montessori developed certain visions and through these visions applied and planned classes for children.” (1998, p. 42)

Deprived of their teaching materials, the Montessoris used the resource that was plentiful in Kodaikanal: nature! They wrote a curriculum that had no boundaries and is still relevant today. It arouses interest and intensifies the child’s sense of belonging to the planet through time and space. Montessori wrote:

“Let us give the child a vision of the whole universe. The universe is an imposing reality and an answer to all questions. We shall walk together on this path of life, for all things are part of the universe and are connected with each other to form one whole unity.” (1989, p. 5-6)

Back at the hotel, I expressed my gratitude to the manager, and I ventured to ask him how he knew where “Rose Bank” was. He smiled at me and said every house in Kodaikanal is known by its name. We have no addresses here, just the names of the houses. I was certainly glad that some things don’t change and “Rose Bank” has stayed “Rose Bank” over the years. 🌍

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