

# MONTESSORI IN INDIA

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## MONTESSORI IN INDIA – 70 YEARS

### CHAPTER ONE: INDIA BEFORE MONTESSORI: 1870 – 1939

Madras. The very name brings to mind a rush of sensory delights: mouth-watering flavours of idli-s, dosa-s and filter kaapi, lilting notes from Carnatic music, kutcheri-s, fragrances of the mullai and flowers, the soft rustle of pattu sarees, awe-inspiring sights of rising temple gopuram-s and much more. Even for those who have grown used to calling the city Chennai, the word Madras conjures up an old world charm. Madras (as the city was called in those days) was known for many things. There was an upsurge of activity in the country, and especially in the city, after the First War of Independence in 1857. And Madras had placed itself rightfully on the world map – a port city and a vast expanse of virgin land holding the promise of more mansions and Victorian palaces for the British.

Madras was an important city in South India, a city where the need for primary education was given great importance even during the turbulent times of struggle for independence. Little wonder that it served as the fertile ground in which one of the most significant modern spiritual-social-educational movements, The Theosophical Society, took root in India.

#### MADRAS IN THE 1870S

The arrival of Madam Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Col. Henry Steele Olcott in the 1870s slowly started changing the educational landscape in Madras. They started the Theosophical Society in 1875 with an aim of spreading the message of Universal Brotherhood. The Theosophical Society was started on 200 acres of land which was then called the Huddleston Gardens. At that time, Adyar was quite the southernmost part of Madras and the Society was formed hugging the banks of the Adyar River and the sea-shore.

The only other prominent landmark on the banks of the Adyar River that survives from that time is the Chettinad Palace. The Chettinad Palace was built during the first half of the 20th century and is the home to the heirs of Rajah Annamalai Chettiar of Chettinad, the founder of the Annamalai University. Apart from this, the Theosophical Society was almost considered the end of the city.

India, in 1875, was still the jewel of the British Empire. She had long been considered a mystery, evoking fairy tale visions of treasures and untold material riches as well as being the home of secrets and traditional wisdom that have been whispered down the generations. And one of the occidental admirers of this mystical land and her fascinating culture and religion was Henry Steele Olcott.

#### H.S. OLCOTT AND THE FOUNDING OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Though it was after his meeting with Helen Blavatsky at 42 that he started the Theosophical Society, Olcott by then had already led an eventful life. The eldest of six children, he was born on August 2, 1832 in Orange, New Jersey. In his teens he attended the College of the City of New York and Columbia University until his father's business failed in 1851. Olcott then moved near his uncles in Ohio, where he was a farmer for two years. His uncles encouraged his interest in the paranormal, including mesmerism, in which he found he had some ability. These were perhaps the foundational stones which formed the bedrock of his later work with the Theosophical Society.

Returning to the East Coast, Olcott studied agriculture and was recognised for his work at the Model Farm of Scientific Agriculture at Newark, New Jersey. Soon he co-founded a farm school in Mt. Vernon,

New York, which pioneered modern methods of teaching agriculture in the U.S. He became an expert on agriculture, writing a well-received book on the subject (1858), and also did agricultural research in Europe. The Mark Lane Express and New York Tribune both retained him as agricultural correspondent.

In 1860, Olcott married Mary Epplee Morgan, with whom he had four children, the youngest two dying in infancy. The marriage was unsuccessful, and by 1874 he had granted his wife a divorce.

When the Civil War broke out, Olcott enlisted in the signal corps and went through the North Carolina campaign under General Burnside. After recovering from dysentery, he served for four years as Special Commissioner of the War Department, investigating fraud, corruption and graft at the New York Mustering and Disbursement Office. On account of his integrity, courage and effectiveness, he was made a Colonel and assigned to the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. to investigate fraud in the Navy Yards, where he reformed the system of accounts and effectively reduced corruption. He received high commendation for his work from the Secretary of the Navy. When Lincoln was assassinated, Olcott was appointed to the three-man special commission to investigate the case.

After resigning his commission in 1865, he returned to New York City to study law. In 1868, he was admitted to the New York Bar and became successful as a specialist in insurance, customs and revenue cases. Once established, his interest in experimental psychology and the occult revived. To the observer, this periodic kindling of interest in the paranormal on Olcott's part establishes early pointers to his later work with the Society.

On reading, in 1874, of spiritualistic phenomena at the Eddy Farmstead in Vermont, he determined to investigate them for himself and obtained an assignment from the New York Sun. This series of articles stimulated great enthusiasm, and the New York Daily Graphic persuaded him to return for six weeks to write twelve more articles. These were reprinted all over the country, and investigators of phenomena in Europe and America praised his thorough scientific methods. Both series of articles formed the basis of *People from the Other World*, published in 1875.

The year 1874 was a turning point in his life. He met Helena Blavatsky in October during his second stay at the Eddy Farmstead, and they quickly became friends.

On returning from Vermont, Olcott continued his spiritualistic investigations and his friendship with Blavatsky. In May 1875, he received his first letter from what Blavatsky was referring to as Ascended Masters, human beings who had attained almost godlike status while being bound to human bodies.

In July 1875, Blavatsky recorded in her scrapbook: "Orders received from India direct to establish a philosophico-religious Society and choose a name for it – also to choose Olcott."

A lecture by G.H. Felt, on September 7, 1875 on "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians" led to the decision to form a society for the study of such subjects. "The Theosophical Society" was the title chosen for it. The Society was to be truly "eclectic" and without distinctions. Several meetings were held to frame and pass rules, and the present Seal was adopted. On November 17, 1875, Olcott gave his Inaugural Address, and chose this date as the founding day of The Theosophical Society. Olcott was elected President and Blavatsky, Corresponding Secretary.

## ARRIVAL IN INDIA

After a year, the Society had not grown, and all administrative power was placed in the President-Founder, who also supported it financially. Olcott continued his law practice by day, helping Blavatsky with her seminal book *Isis Unveiled* late into the night whenever they were not busy entertaining visitors. He was undergoing a period of training and discipline. Once *Isis* was published (1877), Olcott and Blavat-

sky prepared to go to India, leaving in December 1878. Olcott was anxious to visit the homeland of his guru and the philosophy he revered. In addition, he idolised both the land and its people. On arriving in India, he soon recognised its problems, but it always remained his spiritual homeland and permanent residence through a life of extensive travel.

In keeping with his fondness for the philosophy of the land, Olcott's primary objectives in India were to disseminate Asian philosophy to the West by encouraging accurate translations of texts by native scholars and to revive Oriental spiritual traditions – principally Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism – which were suffering under the military, economic, and political subjugation of the colonial powers. Olcott is best known for his work with Buddhists, particularly in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and next to the Theosophical Society, this work was closest to his heart. He helped revive the practice of Buddhism, wrote a Buddhist Catechism still used today, and worked to bring the various branches of Buddhism into agreement on fundamental points so they could present a united front to the West. Modern Sri Lanka's acknowledgment of Olcott's substantial contribution to the country is evident when the authorities decided to name one of Colombo's main streets Olcott Road.

Blavatsky left for Europe in 1885 to regain her health and to write *The Secret Doctrine*, having resigned as Corresponding Secretary even as Olcott continued to work in Asia, lecturing and establishing new branches.

On recovering her health sufficiently, Blavatsky began again to take a more active role in the Society, revitalising and leading the European work and organising the Esoteric Section under her direct control.

After Blavatsky's death in 1891, Henry S. Olcott (President-Founder), William Q. Judge (Vice-President of the Theosophical Society and co-head of the Esoteric Section) and Annie Besant (President of the Blavatsky Lodge, London, and co-head of the Esoteric Section) were the leading officials of the Theosophical Society. Mrs. Besant would have much to do with India in the decades to come, as we shall see.

Rifts in organisations are not uncommon, and personal and policy tensions between Olcott and Judge eventually took their toll and the Indian and American branches split in 1895, both keeping the name of Theosophical Society (usually mentioning "Adyar" after the name of the Indian branch).

After the division, Olcott continued his theosophical work with Annie Besant, travelling widely, lecturing and establishing new branches. He passed away on February 17, 1907, in Adyar.

## THE ZEITGEIST OF THE TIME

In essence, the Theosophical Society, while being a spiritual association, was also one very much interested in the mundane world and the betterment of mankind and society. Such duality makes it quite a hybrid organisation. The same dichotomy was found in another organisation that was founded in 1893 in France.

Freemasonry had long been a dual organisation too, both spiritual and political. While its homogenised membership in the early years of its existence restricted its vision, by the dawn of the new century, things started to change. By allowing more diverse individuals to enter its fold, it became truer to its humanist and egalitarian ideals.

When Maria Desraimes and George Martin founded La Respectable Lodge, Human Rights, Co-Masonry) in Paris in 1893, they went even farther, by creating a brand of freemasonry that was open to atheists and to people of all religions (including polytheist ones). There were no social or gen-

der-based restrictions to membership, either. Co-freemasonry had, from the very beginning, the same foundational blocks as Theosophy: a mixture of spiritualism and intense social work.

Freemasonry was already present in India, and had quite a few prominent members including Swami Vivekananda, Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari and Fakruddin Ali Ahmed.

Though Olcott brought Theosophy to India, it was Annie Besant who brought the principles of Co-freemasonry to the country and helped shift the focus of the Theosophical Society to social reforms and educational needs, a move that eventually led to the invitation of Dr Montessori to India.

## **ANNIE BESANT**

Annie Besant, like Montessori, led quite an extraordinary life, a life rich in struggles, of victory and defeats, marked by stubborn obstinacy and willingness to change, faith in what she believed was right and a constant drive to seek out the truth.

Annie Wood was born in 1847 in London into a middle-class family of Irish origin. Her father died when she was five years of age, leaving the family almost penniless. Her mother supported the family by running a boarding house for boys at Harrow. However, she was unable to support Annie and persuaded her friend Ellen Marryat to care for her.

Marryat made sure that Annie had a good education. She was given a strong sense of duty to society and an equally strong sense of what independent women could achieve. As a young woman, Annie travelled widely in Europe.

In 1867, Annie Wood married clergyman Frank Besant. He was an evangelical Anglican clergyman who seemed to share many of her concerns. Soon Frank became vicar and Annie moved to Sibsey with him and within a few years they had two children, Digby and Mabel. The marriage was, however, a disaster. The first conflict came over money and Annie's independence. Annie wrote short stories, children's books and articles. As married women did not have the legal right to own property, Frank was able to take all the money she earned. Politics further divided the couple. Annie began to support farm workers who were fighting to unionise and secure better conditions. Frank was a Tory and sided with the landlords and farmers. The tensions came to a head when Annie refused to attend Communion. She left him and returned to London. They were legally separated and Annie took her daughter with her but divorce was unthinkable for Frank, and she was to remain Mrs. Besant for the rest of her life. Now free of her husband, she started fighting for all the causes she deemed just and worthy which included freedom of thought, women's rights, birth control, workers' rights, Fabian socialism and Irish home rule. Given that some of these subjects still provoke much debate in parts of the world today, it is quite astounding to see how far ahead of her time Mrs. Besant was.

She made herself infamous by publishing a book that promoted birth control in 1877, and became a public figure, giving lectures, writing articles, leading protests and strikes. She was arrested more than once, and the ensuing scandals cost her dearly. If at first, she was able to keep contact with her children and to take care of her daughter, her political activities soon resulted in her husband having total custody of their children.

Yet she didn't stop, but chose to continue the fight.

She is remembered for her close association with the protests at Trafalgar Square that led to Bloody Sunday in 1887.

She helped organise the major strike of the matchstick girls, and ran successfully for the Tower Hamlet jurisdiction of the London School Board in 1888, a revenge for her, as she put it: 'Ten years ago,



under a cruel law, Christian bigotry robbed me of my little child. Now the care of the 763,680 children of London is placed partly in my hands.'

Twenty-three years younger than Besant, it is entirely possible that young Maria was influenced by such strong women during her growing years. Her own struggles to fight her way through medical school echoed the battles that women were waging all over the world to gain more rights.

In 1889, aged 42, Annie Besant met Helen Blavatsky, and shortly thereafter she became one of the first women to be initiated to the newly created masonic order that would later be known as "Le droit humain".

Working both "at the glory of the great architect of the universe" and at "the betterment of mankind", she found a way to combine her spiritual, political and social desires. She founded the first English lodge of Co-freemasonry in 1902.

### **ANNIE BESANT'S ARRIVAL IN INDIA**

Annie Besant arrived in India for the first time in 1893, two years after Blavatsky's death, and met Henry Olcott. She was already President of the English lodge of Theosophy, and in 1907, after Olcott's death, she became the Theosophical Society's President. She based herself mostly in India after that point, and brought with her both co-freemasonry and a lifetime of experience in social struggles and political movements. Gradually, she ended up feeling Indian by adoption, and immersed herself in the local struggles.

The beginnings of the twentieth century saw India playing host to numerous struggles. After the first uprising of 1857, a new national identity slowly began to take shape, driven by the fervour of the time, and this gained in momentum with every passing decade. Swami Vivekananda is often viewed as one of the leaders of this Indian renaissance, along with Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and others.

Annie Besant, with her Irish roots, saw many parallels between India's fight for autonomy and the Irish struggle. She knew that without a strong unified movement, little would be possible.

In 1916, she managed to successfully unite the radical wing of the Indian Congress, led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and the All India Muslim League of Mohammad Ali Jinnah to found the Home Rule Movement, which advocated an autonomous and self-ruled India with close ties to the British Empire.

As she puts it at the presidential address delivered at the thirty-second Indian National Congress held at Calcutta (Kolkata) on December 26, 1917:

The England of Milton, Cromwell, Sydney, Burke, Paine, Shelley, Wilberforce, Gladstone; the England that sheltered Mazzini, Kossuth, Kropotkin, Stepniak, and that welcomed Garibaldi; the England that is the enemy of tyranny, the foe of autocracy, the lover of freedom, that is the England I would fain here represent to you today. Today, when India stands erect, not suppliant people, but a Nation, self-conscious, self-respecting, determined to be free; when she stretches out her hand to Britain and offers friendship not subservience; co-operation not obedience; today let me, western-born but in spirit eastern, cradled in England but Indian by choice and adoption: let me stand as the symbol of union between Great Britain and India: a union of hearts and free choice, not of compulsion; and therefore of a tie which cannot be broken, a tie of love and of mutual helpfulness, beneficial to both Nations and blessed by God.

She paid for her implication in this movement with imprisonment, and she received the support of Mahatma Gandhi who had recently arrived in India after his struggle for civil rights in South Africa.

One of the main concerns of the time about the British rule was that the colonial administration

was not able to give proper schooling to all Indian children. Gopal Drishna Gokhale, one of the moderate leaders of the Indian Congress ironically calculated that, if the population did not increase, at the rate at which the colonial government was promoting schooling, every boy would be in school 115 years hence, and every girl in 665 years!

All the reformers of the time were chanting it like a mantra: 'Education is the key to shake off the yoke of imperial rule, to reclaim national identity and pride, and to successfully enter the industrial age.' They all knew that democracy was only possible with an educated population.

It is then of no surprise that the Montessori Method very quickly gained interest in India.

Before coming to India in 1939, we know that Dr Montessori met at least two historical figures of the Indian independence movement.

We know of at least one formal meeting with Rabindranath Tagore in 1929 at a conference held in Kronborg Castle, Helsingör, in Denmark. The conference was organised by Beatrice Ensor, theosophist and educationist, and founder of the still active World Education Fellowship (note: from the proceedings of this conference, it has become clear that Tagore did not deliver a lecture or speech: it is suspected that although scheduled to attend, he was not able to travel to Copenhagen, eds AMI).

Alongside Maria Montessori and Rabindranath Tagore were such guests as Jean-Ovide Decroly, Jean Piaget (his conference paper was read out by someone else, and he may not have attended in person, eds. AMI), Helen Parkhurst, who was one of Montessori's students (but who then spoke on her Dalton Plan (eds. AMI), Pierre Bovet and Paul Geheeb.

In October 1931, Dr Montessori met in person with Gandhiji on the occasion of his arrival at the second Round Table Conference in London, where Dr Montessori was conducting a training course. They met through mutual friends, but already knew a lot about each other. On October 28, 1931, Gandhiji delivered an address at the Montessori Training College where he expressed his agreement with the Montessori Method and believed it to have more scope than being just an efficient way of transmitting knowledge to children, but as a way to promote world peace: 'You have very truly remarked that if we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with children and if they will grow up in their natural innocence, we won't have the struggle, we won't have to pass fruitless idle resolutions, but we shall go from love to love and peace to peace, until at last all the corners of the world are covered with that peace and love for which, consciously or unconsciously, the whole world is hungering.'

In his address, we also find two quite interesting points that add to the history of the Montessori Movement in India.

"It was in 1915 when I reached India, that I first became acquainted with your activities. It was in a place called Amreli that I found that there was a little school being conducted after the Montessori system. Your name had preceded that first acquaintance. I found no difficulty in finding out at once that this school was not carrying out the spirit of your teaching; the letter was there, but whilst there was an honest – more or less honest – effort being made, I saw too that there was a great deal of tinsel about it. I came in touch, then, with more such schools, and the more I came in touch, the more I began to understand that the foundation was good and splendid, if the children could be taught through the laws of nature – nature, consistent with human dignity, not nature that governs the beast."

Gandhiji mentions here that not only were there Montessori schools in India as far back of 1915, but that there were enough of them to allow him to get a good idea of the Method and the qualitative diversity of how it could be put in practice. On his way back, he visited the Montessori schools in Rome .

In 1931, despite Gandhiji's reassurance that her Movement was getting more widespread in India than in Europe, Montessori was yet to travel to the sub-continent. She was yet to witness the fall of her dream in Europe to the better end.

We do not know if Maria Montessori and Annie Besant ever met. But what we do know is that Annie Besant was interested in the Montessori Method, and that she had sponsored a Montessori section in the Guindy School. The school had run under the directorship of Mr G.V. Subba Rao with the help of one of two people trained under Dr Montessori in London. The term "section" probably meant the school had a 3-6 environment and non-Montessori elementary school, since the 6-12 programme was yet to take shape.

The school was renamed Besant Memorial School after Dr Besant's death.

Annie Besant did not invite Maria Montessori to come to India. She died in 1933. After her, George Sydney Arundale became President of the Theosophical Society, and it was he who would bring Maria Montessori to Adyar six years later.

George Sydney Arundale was quite close to Annie Besant, and shared many similarities with her. He was like her, English, and had fallen in love with India and called the country his home. Like her, he believed in the greatness of the country, and of the need for an independent rule.

## **GEORGE SYDNEY ARUNDALE AND RUKMINI DEVI**

George Sydney Arundale was born on December 1, 1878, at Wonesh, Surrey, England, son of Rev. John Kay, a preacher, and his wife Mary Anne Elizabeth, née Arundale. His mother died in childbirth and his father went to Australia. Adopted by his aunt Miss Francesca Arundale, a wealthy theosophist, George took his mother's maiden name. Educated at school in Wiesbaden, Germany, and Linton House, London, Arundale graduated from St. John's College, Cambridge (B.A., 1898, LL.B. 1899, M.A., 1902), thus completing a gentleman's education.

Arundale joined the Theosophical Society in 1895, and co-freemasonry in 1902. After hearing Annie Besant, he dedicated himself to her service. He arrived in India in 1903 to teach history at her Central Hindu College, Benares, where he became headmaster in 1907 and principal between 1909 and 1913.

At this time, a lot of efforts of the Theosophical Society were devoted to the young Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was regarded by many to be the new "World Teacher". Arundale, who was mostly in Europe, instituted the preparatory Order of the Star in the East in 1911, the organisation that was dedicated to serve Krishnamurti, editing its journal, *Herald of the Star*, until 1913.

In 1916, he returned to India to support Mrs. Besant's Home Rule for India League, and was interned in 1917. The two of them also founded the Indian Boy Scouts' Association along with others, and the theosophical National University, Madras, which conferred Arundale's honorary D.Litt in 1924, a title that he used thereafter.

In April 1920, Arundale married 16-year-old Rukmini Devi, daughter of Pandit Nilakanta Sastri.

In 1925, Arundale and Rukmini Devi went to Sydney, then a major theosophical centre, invited by C.W. Leadbeater.

In the early 1930s, Dr Arundale returned to Madras and, while maintaining Australian connections, wrote, lectured and travelled as world President of the Theosophical Society from 1934. It was on a visit to Holland in 1938 that Dr Arundale extended a very warm welcome to Dr Montessori and he was delighted that she accepted his invitation. It was initially decided that Dr Montessori would come to India in October 1939 and would stay in the country for six months. It was also decided that she would study



the Indian conditions and relate her educational systems to the needs of the Indian child.

Dr Arundale was very concerned about education and when he assumed the role of president of the Theosophical Society after Annie Besant, the importance given to education by the Theosophical Society gained great momentum.

He believed that education had to be made compulsory, and would have to be put back in Indian hands: Indian teachers in Indian schools to teach Indian languages, culture and history. As he said: 'India refuses to be an educational dependency of Great Britain any longer.'

He was supported in everything by his wife, who was his close partner, and yet was capable of leading her own personal projects.

Rukmini Devi was born on February 29, 1904, in an upper-class Brahmin family in Madurai. A theosophist and follower of Dr Annie Besant, upon retirement, her father Nilakanta Sastri shifted to Adyar, where he built his home near the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. It was here that young Rukmini was exposed to not just theosophical thought but also to new ideas in culture, theatre, music and dance. And it was here that she later met George Arundale.

In 1920, when she was aged 16, she married Dr Arundale, a step that was met with great disapproval from her family. Eight years later, when the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova came to Bombay, the Arundales witnessed her performance. Later, they happened to travel on the same ship as her to Australia, where she was to perform next. It was during this voyage that their friendship grew, and soon Rukmini Devi started learning dance from one of Anna's leading solo dancers, Cleo Nordi.

It was at the behest of Pavlova that Rukmini Devi turned her attention to discovering traditional Indian dance forms, which had fallen into disrepute, and dedicated the rest of her life to their revival. In 1936, with the assistance of her husband, she founded the Kalakshetra Foundation to help revive traditional Indian arts and crafts, and to teach them in a traditional Indian way.

In 1939, Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari, best known as Rajaji, was the Premier of Madras. One of Gandhiji's closest associates, he most certainly knew about Maria Montessori and her Method, and her visit to his city was an event that he undoubtedly welcomed.

So, one thing after another, with roots deep in the past, everything converged to have Montessori come to India.

Just as in a Casa dei Bambini, where the directress puts special care in the setting up of the environment, there was a great deal of anticipation, excitement and preparation around Montessori's arrival in India.

The Theosophical Society too was gearing up for the arrival of the Montessoris and preparations were in full swing to receive them. Dr Arundale makes a mention of the importance given to her arrival in *The Theosophist*, a journal of the Theosophical Society.

One of the special activities which is now occupying my attention and that of the small committee which I have established to deal with it, is the visit of Mme. Montessori to India. Last year, when we were in Holland, I extended her a very cordial invitation to give some of her genius to the helping of India. Lacerated, as she has been, both in person and in fortune, by the Italian and Spanish situations, she herself has been taking more and more interest in India and her problems. And when I invited her to come, she most heartily agreed on condition that she should have the necessary time to study the Indian educational situation, for, as she truly said, her methods must adapt themselves to the needs of different types of children throughout the world.

It has been settled that she shall arrive in Adyar about the beginning of October and settle down to a course of examining the younger children as to the modifications which her method may need in respect to them. Our Montessori committee has written far and wide throughout India, advertising her coming, intimating the holding of the training course, and inquiries to the lectures which universities and other public bodies might be eager for her to deliver. The response has been extra-ordinary, especially with regard to applications for admission to the training course, and, if all goes well, Mme. Montessori's visit shall be memorable in the annals of Indian education. The other day I received a letter from Mr Gandhi in the course of which he expressed his very great interest in her coming, feeling that she might be able to give considerable help.

Thanks to the generosity of a few friends, I have been able to guarantee her passage out of India and back to Europe again, together with that of any friends she may wish to accompany her.

I believe that her adopted son, Mr Montessori, will be with her. The Principal of the Besant Theosophical School will meet her in Mr Schwarz's beautiful bungalow, Olcott Gardens. The training course will be held in the grounds of the Besant Theosophical School, and we shall probably have to have accommodation for at least 200 students. Of course, all the profits from her visit to India will, with the exception of the actual expenses of travelling and living, go to Mme. Montessori herself. This is the least we can do to give honour to one of the greatest women of our age. I believe that her visit will be very profitable, alike from the educational and from the purely financial stand point, and I hope, therefore, that I shall be able to repay the loan my friends have made to me. I need hardly say that the Theosophical Society and the Besant Theosophical School are much honoured by the fact that she begins her Indian educational work here at Adyar.

(July, 1939, *The Theosophist*, Vol. 60, Part II, April 1939-Sept. 1939 Vol. LX, No. 10 On the Watch Tower by GSA)

Even a workshop to prepare Montessori material according to specifications was created. She would have full access and use of the school, and she would lecture on a platform under the banyan tree.

Dr Arundale published an account of these decisions in preparation for her arrival and also a message sent by her in *The Theosophist*.

In the meantime, the spirit of her work could not be more appropriately articulated from the point of view of education as the means for social change than in the great message that follows:

The social events of the year should unite us more closely this Christmas than ever before. But it is not music or joy that is in our hearts; we are thinking of other things, of the massacre of the innocents, of the grief and tears of the mothers, of innocent blood spilled in a mad fury of barbarism. It is the flight into Egypt: the children are leaving the fatherland in search of refuge. But, were not such events once closely connected with the birth of the child, the Saviour? This was the child they had all been seeking, but no one had discovered Him; only some humble had seen him. To find this child, even the most powerful in the world had to trust to a star which guided them. So it appears to be happening now. The child is born and we must seek for him: a saviour is living among us. In our century, which has been heralded as the century of the child, the adult is swept away and engulfed in his petty or fiendish scheming. Our hope is in the child. When it is realised that the fallen man must seek in the child the help for his salvation, human society will be rebuilt and redeemed. — Maria Montessori

(*The Theosophist*, Vol. LX, Part I, Oct. 1938 – Mar 1939, On the Watch Tower, The Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, India 1939).

There were advertisements about her arrival and the training course that was to be held in the Theosophical Society. There were people from all over the world applying for the course and it was a truly international event that people in Adyar were waiting to experience.

The war finally broke out in September 1939, and many people were afraid that this would jeopardise Montessori's coming.

Dr Arundale gave reassurances to all through his writing in *The Theosophist*:

We have every reason to believe that Madame Montessori, warrior as she is, will come despite the difficulties, she has indicated her desire to come if possible, and the local Government interposes no objection to her coming. There will be a record attendance of students, so that we shall indeed be a large number around about Christmas. Vol.61, Part I, November 1939. – *On the Watch Tower*

And also broadcast in Chicago by Radio WGN in its Midday Service Programme (later published as an article in January 1940 in *The Theosophist*):

Indian teachers have a great admiration for the Montessori System and it is being developed considerably. Next month Mme. Montessori is to visit India and conduct courses. Last year, when visiting the countries of South and Central America, Mexico and Cuba, I called special attention to her last book, *The Secret of Childhood*. It offers a startling new conception of the child which inspires all who love children.

And then, she came.

## Chapter 2: The Montessoris in India: 1939 – 1949

Even before her arrival in India, Dr Montessori had captured Indian hearts. The first International Course run by Dr Montessori in Rome in 1913 included Indians among her students. In fact the Montessori Movement in India has a history almost as old as the Movement itself. And over the years, her students from the early courses in Europe came to India and applied what they had learned.

As planned, Dr Montessori arrived in November 1939. People came from all over India and beyond. Flying was very uncommon and train journeys were still the norm. In fact, some, like Ms Gool Minwalla, travelled for three and a half days, all the way from Karachi, to attend the course. The month and the day of Dr Montessori's arrival are readily accessible in every book that touches on her stay in India, but a mere date can never reveal the electricity in the atmosphere, the sense of anticipation as the crowds build up and a city prepares itself for a big occasion.

Fortunately, some of those who witnessed that grand event are still with us. Mr C. Nachiappan, a lifelong Montessori supporter and founder of Kalakshetra Publications, remembers rather vividly the splendour of the occasion. His memories of the day that Madam, as he refers to Dr Montessori, arrived in India seem so clearly etched that it all appears like yesterday.

It was such an august welcome only given to a very few people in those days. Rukmini Devi had requested a grand welcome for Madam. She arrived in Madras via Bombay in November 1939. She came on a mail plane that was personally piloted by JRD Tata. It was a small plane with just five or six seats only. It was a six-hour journey from Bombay to Madras as it had two hops before finally landing in the Madras airport. The Madras airport was nothing like what it is today. It was a huge ground and only a few flights came in.

We waited there to receive Madam and her son Mario Montessori. Finally she arrived and she was given a guard of honour from the airport through Guindy and through the present Raj Bhavan (the residence of

the Governor) road. Then within the Theosophical Society, there was a guard of honour from the main gate till the Olcott Gardens. Children were standing on both sides of the road and waving out to her as she came and Conrad Woldring (an extremely talented Dutch artist/photographer) took photos at that time.

The fact that JRD Tata, one of the doyens of Indian industry and the first man to obtain an Indian flying licence, flew her personally also gives us an idea of the impact of her coming. Based in Mumbai, and hailing from a Parsi family, Mr Tata had limited links with Madras. But aside from being an immensely successful industrial empire, the Tata Group was – and has always been – a group that nurtured the idea that business was not so much about making money as empowering India and Indians.

That such a man as JRD Tata flew Maria and Mario personally from Bombay to Madras proved that their coming to Madras was seen at the time not as a local event, but a national one, part of the Indian Revolution.

She was then housed in Olcott Gardens bungalow on the first floor and the Montessori section of the school was transferred to the ground floor of the Bungalow.

Mr Nachiappan, born in 1923, was a student of the Besant Memorial School at that time. Mr Felix Laiten was the headmaster of the school and Mr Nachiappan proudly remembers that he was among the very few who knew how to drive and was asked to take the Montessoris around the city. He recalls:

Athai (that's how Rukmini Devi was referred to by the students at that time) asked me to take Madam around the city for shopping in the Chevrolet that she entrusted me with. I remember that Madam used to shop a lot at Spencer's. She shopped usually for the cold storage food. Spencer's then used to have a lot of food products from England. And so she would go there. For some reason she never drank water. She only used to have lemonade. She also loved Italian coffee, she drank it very frequently during the day, but in small quantities.

Students had arrived from all parts of the country and abroad for the training course and it was a truly international gathering. They were all gathered under the beautiful banyan tree at the Theosophical Society on a calm December morning where Dr Arundale delivered the welcome address for the inauguration of the course.

It coincided with the 24th International Convention of the Theosophical Society which was also held in Adyar over December 26-31, 1939.

The *Theosophist* issue of March 1940 includes an account of the speech given in December 1939 during the course inauguration by Dr Arundale and Dr Montessori.

Friends, it gives me the very greatest pleasure as President of the Theosophical Society to welcome to our platform at this convention our very distinguished and world renowned guest, Dr Maria Montessori. I feel sure you are all of you very happy to see her here and are looking forward with the deepest interest to that exposition of the Science of Education which she alone in the world can give. We welcome also Mr Montessori who, though not so evident in the foreground, is almost indispensable to Madame Montessori and upon whom she relies so much and who is wonderfully conversant with Madame Montessori's system of education.

We are very thankful to have her here because we believe her presence here is a harbinger of the future of education in this country. True greatness knows no distinction of a country or race or faith, and the tremendous work that Madame Montessori has been able to do in the west will be more than equalled by the tremendous work I feel sure she will do in the East. I am most happy to feel that there is some likelihood of Madame Montessori's co-operation with our own educational work to strengthen it in every possible way, so as to enable us the more effectively to serve India and the East generally. There are no details of the plans

we may be able to adumbrate, but I feel sure that we shall work together under her great inspiration and I am more thankful that it has fallen in the privilege of our society to be the first to give her the warmest and most grateful of welcome.

I now call Madame Montessori to speak to us. She will speak in that very beautiful language, Italian, and it will be translated into English, by Mr Montessori. I can assure that if you had only the Italian that would be quite enough. You would gain from the rhythm, the music and the beauty of that language all that you would need. But owing to the human frailty and our lack of understanding of that language, it will be translated into English.”

After Dr Arundale’s welcome, Dr Montessori stepped up to address the eager audience.

I feel as I stand facing you that this is one of the greatest moments in my life. For many decades, the child has helped and revealed to me something which lay in the depths of its soul. And my work has been the work of a follower, a follower who has discovered something and followed that lead, followed that something which had been discovered in the soul of the child.

But how much lack of comprehension, how much misunderstanding, have I not met in so many countries, because the people thought I was talking about a method of education, while I was speaking of a revelation given to me by the soul. But here, among you all, I feel that there is a very deep and clear understanding, because the awakened spirit and soul is necessary in order to be able to enter into the spirit, the soul. That is why I say it was a great event in my life to have been called here and to have had the privilege to be able to teach a great group of your citizens. It will be my greatest wish to be able to remain here among you and to have your collaboration. I say very frankly and honestly that I do not work for India but that I work with the Indians. I wish to work with the Indians, so that a great centre may be found here which may have influence upon the rest of the world.

“India first.” (said Dr Montessori in English)

It would be difficult in a few minutes to illustrate the work of my life, and even if I didn’t, I would not be developing the theme that I have given, because I said that I would speak of the Child Messiah. The Messiah is a teacher. Therefore, I will not talk about a method of educating children, but about something which has been revealed by children, which had come forth from the Child’s soul. In order to give a clear idea of what I think, I shall make a short reflection,” and she continued her speech in Italian while Mario translated for her.

She concluded her speech with,

Let us look upon the child as our collaborator. He has one part of the task, we another. His task is to furnish us with first detachment, the first light of pure love. Human society cannot be changed unless both adults and children collaborate. It is necessary to take this treasure and to cultivate it. To cultivate it is not easy, and that is the task of education. But in true education, in real education, not only is there the child who is educated but also the adult undergoes transmutation. May I finish by quoting a poet who shows us this sentiment, this ancient truth:

The Child is the Eternal Messiah  
Who is sent continually among fallen men.  
In order to uplift themselves  
Their Nation, the World, and the Heavens.



## THE FIRST COURSE AND THE INITIAL YEARS

The following is an excerpt from the newsletter of the Association Montessori Internationale in 1939.

The most important event of this year is no doubt Dr Montessori and Mr Montessori's visit to India where they are giving the First Indian Montessori Training Course which was organised by the Theosophical Society on their estate at Adyar near Madras.

Dr Montessori travelled by air from Naples. In Karachi where they changed from a plane of the Royal Dutch Airlines to one of the Imperial airways, they were officially received by the Mayor of Karachi and other authorities of the town.

The course was inaugurated on Nov. 11th by the Rt.Rev. Dr G.S. Arundale, President of the Theosophical Society and honorary member of the AMI. Dr Montessori was given an official welcome by the Mayor of Madras, the Vice-Chancellor of the Madras University, the President of the South Indian Teachers' Union. The Lord Bishop of Madras, some Indian Princes and the governments of several States sent messages of greeting.

There are more than 300 students from all parts of India, Burma and Ceylon, and even one from Zanzibar, E. Africa. Five States that have introduced the method in their schools sent official delegates. Also the Catholic Missions sent students.

All the speakers, at the inauguration, unanimously agreed that Dr Montessori's visit to India was a very important fact in Indian educational history and would certainly have far-reaching consequences. They also stressed her personal courage and deep love of childhood and humanity which had urged her to undertake this far journey, notwithstanding the extremely difficult circumstances of the moment.

Dr Montessori expressed her thanks for the splendid reception and said that she had not come to India for the sole purpose of teaching her method of education, but above all to spread the message of the child, to stress the great values hidden in childhood that can give such great help to the adult world in these times of confusion. Only the collaboration between the children and the adults, she said, will be able to solve the problems of our time.

The course was held in the compound of the Theosophical Society, Adyar. As there was no building large enough to accommodate all the students, palm leaf huts were built, the largest of which served as the lecture hall.

A dais of flagstones was built for Dr Montessori's table. The inauguration of the Course was attended by the leading personalities of Madras, among them C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurti. Students came from all over India and Sri Lanka to attend this course, which involved three months of intensive work. The students lived in the compound of the Theosophical Society.

It was a residential course. Lecture times were rarely fixed and lectures were given at all hours of the day from early morning till late evening. The students lived close to the Montessoris and learned from them with reverence. The first course took place from late December 1939 till February 1940.

Dr Montessori lectured in Italian. These lectures were translated into English by Mario Sr., who, from all accounts, was a jolly person and Dr Montessori's companion, friend and helper, and kept her in good spirits. Dr Montessori lectured in low tones. When she spoke, the students maintained attentive silence. The translation done after every few lines gave the students a few moments to assimilate what was said. Dr Montessori paid very close attention to the translation. After each lecture, the students took leave of Dr Montessori with devotion, reverently touching her hands, or even touching her feet.

Mr C. Nachiappan remembers how Dr Montessori gave her lectures. ‘Madam had beautiful hands with which she demonstrated her material. I also have a film on her demonstration. She had a very musical way of speaking. Mario would translate and sometimes grope for the right word —she would be listening intently and would give the correct English word, where she felt it necessary. She would often prompt Mario with the English word that he was looking for!’

He continues: ‘There was a person called Mr Gundu Mani, who knew shorthand and was also a typist. He was also a very jovial man and lived in Urur Village near Kalakshetra in Adyar. His daughter did the course. He was asked to take down everything. He would tell Madam Montessori—”slow, slow” and she would say, “I have to speak and Mario has to translate, so you should have plenty of time!”

Mr Nachiappan also remembers that Dr Montessori always had a scientific approach. He recalls that if children came to her, she would not show her affection or be demonstrative in any way. Instead, she would observe them with great attention. According to Mr Nachiappan, Conrad Woldring even filmed one of these instances.

Mr Vaitheeswaran, who did the course under Dr Montessori in Adyar, would give Mr Nachiappan the 1939 galley proofs. Mr Gundi Mani would type out all the notes for the lecture that was held the same day and then the galleys would be sent every night to Vasantha Press, in Adyar. The notes were distributed to the students the next day. Looking back, as a publisher, Mr Nachiappan believes that these galley proofs were a great service to the students and to the world of Montessori.

As a part of the effort to find witnesses of this historical course, we met with Mrs Ambika Buch, dance teacher at Kalakshetra, and the daughter of Mrs Gangeshwari and Mr Nataranjan, both of whom were enrolled in the course of 1939 under Dr Montessori.

Mrs Buch recalls some of the memories her parents shared with her when they were on the course.

My mother and father met during the course. My mother is from Sri Lanka. She finished her 10th and 12th standard here in Madras and then went to Trivandrum for a year to study. At that time Trivandrum was under Madras University. After graduation she met my father in the Theosophical Society during the first course in 1939.

My father was already in the Theosophical Society and had decided to do the course because it was happening right there. My mother often said to us that he was an outstanding person in the course. She said this to us because my father used to laugh at it so much. It seems my mother was a rather quiet person and she just used to attend the class and get back home. On the day of the examinations too, she apparently finished rather quickly and left the hall in less than half the time allotted for the exam. The others laughed at my mother, saying they didn’t know what she wrote and understood. Then after two or three days Madam Montessori came to class, brought the papers and asked, “Who is Gangeshwari here?” Even then it seems people were smiling. Then Madam asked her to come and gave her papers and said, “She is one of the few people who have understood what I said in a nutshell.” Everyone was taken by surprise. My mother used to say this so often to us, because she felt that it was one of the greatest achievements in her life.

Though Mario was helping with the translation when Dr Montessori was lecturing at the course, a lot of his time was spent with the children at the Besant Memorial School. The forms a lot of the foundational material from which the 6-12 programme evolved.

Among the children who attended school at the time that Mario was spending time in the classroom were K.V.S. Krishna, P.K. Rajeshwari and G. Sundari.

## **K.V.S. KRISHNA**

Mr Krishna, now in his seventies, lives in T. Nagar, Chennai, with his wife. He remembers the Olcott Gardens where Dr Montessori had her first environment on the ground floor and where she spent a lot of time observing the children. He was six years of age at that time. Dr Montessori practised her theories and methodologies with them. She would always make sure that the children were well fed before they came to work in the environment. Mr Krishna recollects that Dr Montessori would give him the Pink Tower to work with, but that it would always collapse!

His own interest back in those days was in working with the puzzle maps. After the class, Mario used to take them to play at the beach.

His recollections of Mario are those of a jovial and humorous person who used to pick the crabs on the seashore and point out their parts to his young charges. He would then pretend that he was catching the crabs on the shore to eat them, which would cause great astonishment and alarm among the youngsters! Although he was probably acting in jest, it is interesting to imagine that his European palate was missing these delicacies in faraway Madras, where even the restaurants of the day were probably limited in their range of seafood.

Mr Krishna believes that the interest of the child continues through to adulthood and that the kind of games or materials the children work with has a relation to what they find fascinating as adults. His own fondness for maps and map reading continues to be stronger than ever, and till date, he is a collector of maps. He studies satellite pictures of various places and continues to be intrigued by the natural designs created by land and water forms.

He is currently involved in mapping the travels of various journeys that H.S. Olcott, founder of the Theosophical Society, undertook in India and elsewhere in the world. In his own words: 'I am so fascinated that in spite of all the hardships and lack of facilities, people still travelled, and travelled far and wide.'

What he appreciates most about the Montessori Method of education was the freedom to choose. He himself was not forced to do anything, with the result that his thoughts were left to flow freely. He believes that this helped him to take decisions—some of which may be termed risky—without hesitation, and to stand by them with confidence. His work as an adult included working in the plantations of Kerala, and later in Africa.

He feels that Montessori education can meet with even greater success when it becomes more affordable to all sections of the society. To illustrate this point, he cites a letter written by Gandhiji to Dr Montessori appreciating her efforts and suggesting that no child be deprived of this type of education.

## **P.K. RAJESHWARI**

Ms P.K. Rajeshwari, born in 1928, was a student under Mario Montessori in Besant School in the Theosophical Society. Her father worked closely with Dr Montessori during the first course in Madras.

Sometimes Dr Montessori used to stay in our home in Adyar, I remember her as a majestic person. She loved Indian jewellery and most of the time wore jhimiki (bell-like earrings) and an angavastram (a sash) around her neck.

More than Madam, I remember her son, as he was our teacher. At that time they were just experimenting the Montessori Method for higher classes and I was in the primary classes in Besant School which was also on the Theosophical Society campus. In particular, I remember the botany lessons, which were mostly in the garden. They were nothing but long walks around the campus. Mr Mario would bring a leaf, talk

about it and we would go searching the campus for leaf shapes and specimens related to what was taught in class. Sometimes we would end up spending the whole day looking for leaves in the bushes. I remember my father talking about Dr Montessori with reverence. Later I remember him visiting her in Kodaikanal.

Ms P.K. Rajeshwari, who studied along with her sister Ms P.K. Bhuvaneshwari, later went on to become a teacher herself.

## **G. SUNDARI**

Born in 1929, G. Sundari, affectionately referred to as Sundari Teacher, remembers Mario Montessori from her own days in the Besant Memorial School. An energetic 78 year-old, she has lucid memories of her childhood days, growing up at the Theosophical Society.

We came here [to Madras and to the Theosophical Society] in 1934. We hailed from Tanjore and my father was an active participant of the Home Rule Movement started by Dr Annie Besant. Later under her invitation, we came here to the Theosophical Society. At that time we were also growing up and Besant Memorial School had just been set up.

I have heard that Madam Montessori knew English, but she would never lecture in English. She would only lecture in Italian and her Italian was musical and beautiful. I still remember one word that she used to say very often, “bambino”, which is Italian for children. The word used to sound so musical to us, and she used to say it with such love for children that it sounded so beautiful.

She used to live with Mario on the first floor in the Olcott Bungalow. We used to see her walking up and down most of the time in the open balcony of the Bungalow. The Montessori section of the school was transferred to the ground floor of the Bungalow for their convenience.

Of what little I remember of Dr Montessori, I think she was a majestic personality. Her eyes used to twinkle and she was so full of grace. Although she was big built, one would never think of it at all as she carried herself like that, with very loose-fitting full-length gowns most of the time.