

Maria Montessori and the Theosophical Movement

by Danelys Valcarcel

Throughout the history of our Theosophical movement there have been a number of influential individuals who were able to implement their spiritual knowledge and ideals into revolutionary social causes, bringing about a radical awakening and renewal to the world at large. Annie Besant in particular stands as one of these great leaders, whose will to serve and whose love for humanity broke through barriers against women, casteism, poverty, cruelty and inequality. One of her major impulses was precisely in the field of education. She involved herself both in the effort to revive traditional Indian culture and in educating the vast masses of the illiterate Indian poor.



**MARIA
MONTESSORI
(1870 - 1952)**

Not many of our readers may know, however, that this remarkable woman was also of profound inspiration and support to Dr Maria Montessori in the development of her unique educational philosophy and method. Although initially influenced by the works of the great Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, Édouard Séguin and Friedrich Fröbel, Dr Montessori truly found a

home at our international Headquarters in Adyar, Chennai, India.

Maria Montessori's first acquaintance with India and the TS began in the early twentieth century. In 1907 after establishing her first Casa dei Bambini, she went to hear a lecture by Annie Besant in London, in which Dr Besant spoke with a lot of admiration and respect about the then very new Montessori Method. Dr Montessori felt overwhelmed that such a famous person was talking about her educational experiment in such glowing terms. Later they met and formed a friendly relationship that strengthened with the years.

Speaking at a gathering of distinguished educationists who had gathered to welcome her upon her arrival to India in 1939, Dr Montessori expressed her deepest gratitude to Dr Besant and the Theosophical Society as follows:

I'm especially pleased and appreciate to be here in this centre of history and spirituality which is the Theosophical Society's Headquarters in Adyar. Even from the last century I have had the opportunity of knowing and approaching Dr Besant; it was only ten years after I began my method of education, and during the whole of my life I have had her help and her moral support. This Society, which by essence is an educational and spiritual society, is the most appropriate to give hospitality to this method, and I want in a special manner to thank Dr Arundale for having attracted me here and for having helped me to reach here, so that I could deliver what perhaps some called my message, because I really feel that I have a message to bring to the world. I feel that I'm the faithful servant of a part of humanity which has great powers, but which has not been sufficiently understood. The powerful part of humanity, this group of human entities of which we are all in need is the child. (1)

Maria Montessori was 69 years old when she first went to India, after being invited by the then international president of the Theosophical Society (TS), George Arundale, while he and his wife Rukmini Devi were visiting her in Holland. It was very surprising that Dr Montessori accepted the invitation. India was a totally new world for her, but this journey was a real proof of her openness to adventure and the passion she was able to maintain for her work throughout her life.

These almost seven years spent in India and at the TS were the most spiritual and transformative of her life. It was the place where her mysticism was understood and could be shared with others. She was loved and venerated by the people of India. The TS built a village palm-leaf hut at Olcott Gardens for her to live and give her course. The 300 teachers and student teachers who came from all over India to attend this training were a much larger group than had ever been expected. The students sat barefooted on mats on the floor of the hut while Dr Montessori sat in a wicker chair before a table on a flagstone platform with her son Mario beside her translating the lectures into English. There were always traditional garlands of flowers around her neck presented by her students and fresh flowers brought by them and placed on the table before the beginning of her lessons.

The fact that children of Brahmins and Untouchables lived harmoniously together during the months they spent in the Montessori course greatly impressed Dr Montessori and reinforced her conviction that her system of education was not limited in any way to any country, philosophy, religion, or social conditions; moreover, that it could serve as a means of breaking down the barriers that separated national and social groups from each other and thus serve as an effective tool for peace.

Another source of Theosophical history tells us of an interview that took place in London on December 1933 between C. Jinarajadasa and Maria Montessori,

where she spoke of a discovery she had made in relation to the child. It was something completely unexpected for her and of great importance in education. She observed that the teachers, as soon as they comprehended her educational method, began to change, not only at the level of their work as teachers, but also in their character as human beings, and that this subtle change was produced rather, by the influence of the child on the teacher. She described the child as something like "*un piccolo Messia*" (2) that brings to the teacher a revelation of the whole of Life.



The most important book written by Maria Montessori about her personal insights on child development was *The Absorbent Mind*. One can feel the theosophical influence present in her philosophy while reading passages such as this:

"To know, to love and to serve is the trinomial of all religions, but the child is the true maker of our spirituality. He teaches us the plan of nature for giving form to our conduct and character, a plan fully traced out in all its details of age and work, with its need for freedom and intense activity in accordance with the laws of life. What matters is not physics, or botany, or works of the hand, but the will, and the components of the human spirit which construct themselves by work. The child is the spiritual builder of mankind, and obstacles to his free development are the stones in the wall by which the soul of man has become imprisoned." (3)

This classic work, along with others she was able to write while in Adyar, today have a special place in many library branches of the TS worldwide. Articles also, such as: *The Child*, *Reconstruction in Education* and her most devotional one, *The Child: The Eternal Messiah*, that were published in various issues of *The*

Theosophist (international monthly journal of the TS), are considered as jewels of Montessori philosophy.

World War II had begun in the fall of 1939. Italy entered the war on the side of the Germans, and England interned all Italians in the British territories. Maria Montessori's son was taken away and interned in a camp for civilians in Amednagar, and she was confined to the compound at Adyar. This separation caused her great distress. She found much loving support in all her Indian friends at this point.

Then, on August 31st, 1940, she received a telegram from the Viceroy of India which read: *"We have long thought what to give you for your 70th birthday. We thought that the best present we could give you was to send you back your son."* (4) Dr Montessori and her son spent the rest of the war years working together in India under the sponsorship of the Theosophical Society.

In addition to the trainings given during those years at the Theosophical Society's Headquarters, they gave several others throughout India. Some of the elements of the elementary school materials were developed during that time of further travel. With the aid of G. D. Birla, one of India's leading industrialists, a Montessori society was established in Pilani, Rajasthan, and at the Besant School in Kalakshetra, an art and educational centre founded in Adyar by Rukmini Devi Arundale. A Montessori section was set up in a classroom designed according to plans drawn by Dr Montessori. Many of her books were also published in different Indian languages with the help of her students and the Theosophical Publishing House.

In 1947 she went back to Italy for the reestablishment of The Opera Montessori in Rome. But in the same year she decided to return to India to continue her teacher training work in Adyar and Ahmedabad. In 1949 Dr Montessori travelled to Pakistan at the invitation of the new government to give her last training course in the Orient. *"When she left Pakistan she was garlanded with flowers by her adoring students, many of whom also pressed into her hand photographs - some of themselves, others of the great Gandhi - and was presented with a large cake in the shape of a book on which was written "The Secret of Childhood - With Gratitude to You Who Discovered It."* (5)

Such was, and continues to be the extraordinary connection between Maria Montessori and the Theosophical Movement. The Theosophical Order of Service (TOS) in Pakistan currently runs a Montessori school and teacher programme. Montessori and Montessori-inspired schools continue to spread throughout the world, some of which are either run or supported by TS/TOS Sections. Last year, coinciding with the anniversary of Col. Olcott's birthday, the Olcott Education Society in Adyar founded a Montessori-inspired section for its kindergarten students. The Theosophical education model set forth by Vic Hao Chin of the Golden Link College in the Philippines is, at last, the most accomplished example

of the everlasting bridge between the Montessori and Theosophical educational currents.

References

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- (5) Kramer, Rita. *Maria Montessori A Biography*: Da Capo Press, p. 356

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