“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel”

— Socrates
Chapter 4

LIFE SKETCH OF
RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND
MARIA MONTESSORI
4.0 Introduction

In this chapter early life and work in relation to the personalities of Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori have been explored to trace the development of their ideas about education. Both Tagore and Montessori achieved enormous impact worldwide in the field of education. To examine these issues at length the biographies of Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori has been explored in considerable details.

4.1 Life Sketch of Rabindranath Tagore

On May 6 1861 Rabindranath Tagore (literally meaning ‘Lord of the Sun’ in Bengali) was born into the aristocratic Tagore family at Jorasanko in Calcutta. His familial circumstances facilitated actualization of his innate potential as an artist and later as an educator. He was born in a family that actively took part in the intellectual awakening that happened in India during that time. Tagore grew in a liberal atmosphere of synthesis of the orient and the occident. Besides the ancestral legacy of Dwarkanath Tagore who was the parental grandfather of Rabindranath, his parents Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi, (especially the former) had a crucial role to play in shaping his educational philosophy later in Tagore’s life.

4.1.1 Early life

Growing up in a traditional zamindari household, Tagore was raised by domestic helps at home, more so, as his mother had died in his early childhood. The family had the reputation of an aristocratic way of life and a tradition of luxury, but the children were brought up under the discipline and austerity. In his later life Rabindranath wrote about two types of schooling: the formal institutional education received outside his house and the informal education that he received within the family. A ‘pathshala’ was set up in one corner of the verandah at Jorasanko where he studied with his cousin Birendranath, who was close to him in age and Dwijendranath’s son. Both Birendranath and the Dwijendranath’s son were sent to Oriental the Seminary,
Rabindranath also joined them there. Sharing his first experience at the Oriental Seminary, he wrote:

“What I learnt there, I have no idea, but one of its methods of punishment I still bear in mind. The boy who was unable to repeat his lesson was made to stand on bench with arms extended, and on upturned palms were piled a number of slates… I have since realized how much easier it is to acquire the manner than the matter. Without an effort had assimilated all the impatience, the short temper, the partiality and injustice displayed by my teachers to exclusion of rest of their teaching.” (Tagore 1962)

Rabindranath was transferred to the Normal School which was attached to a teacher training center. The medium of instruction was English. The educational experience of those days shocked Tagore. He was particularly disturbed by the belligerence of the other boys and by the coarseness of the language used by both students and teachers. Of the next school, the Bengal Academy, a Eurasian institution, Tagore observed:

“What we were taught there we never understood, nor did we make any attempt to learn, nor did it seem to make any difference to anybody that we did not… the rooms were cruelly dismal with their walls on guard like policemen. The house was more like pigeon holed box than a human habitation- no decoration, no pictures, not a touch of color, not any attempt to attract the boyish heart- the fact that the likes and dislikes form a large part of the child's mind was ignored. Naturally, our whole being was depressed as we stepped through its doorway into narrow quadrangle- and playing truant became chronic with us.” (Tagore 1940)

The daily routine of Rabindranath Tagore as described by him:

“While it was yet dark, we had to leave our beds, and go to the wrestling –pit with its oil soaked earth…. After wrestling, we just pulled shirt over our earth smeared bodies, and went for physical exercises. At seven o’clock precisely never a minute earlier or later, came our tutor Nilkamal Basu. After him, on
certain days, Sitanath Dutt would teach us science. Then came grammar in Balbodh script with Pandit Tarkaratna. So much for the early morning. After we had finished our bath and toilet, the old horse and carriage would take us to school. Home again at half past four for more exercise. Evening’s lamplight brought Mr. Aghor to teach us English.” (Tagore 1940)

The rigid time-table was further supplemented by lessons in music. Music floated in the very air, he breathed at home. Almost every member of the family was a musician of some sort. He heard and picked up indiscriminately from classical, folk, devotional and other music he heard.

The Bengal Academy with its Anglo Indian atmosphere, pelted lessons for dumb pupils were difficult to endure. It was during this period that he wrote his first long poem ‘Abhilash’. This was published in the following year, 1874 in Tattvabodhini Patrika. Soon after, he changed the school and was admitted to St Xavier’s- with no better result. Finally, in 1875, at the age of fourteen, he stopped going to school altogether.

4.1.2 Family Influence

The cultural atmosphere of Tagore’s household greatly influenced his life. On the one hand, he spoke of tremendous loneliness and neglect, of being raised by servants and unhappy schooling. On the other hand, he speaks of exposure to the rich culture of Joransanko, which helped him to nurture his creativity. Tagore was exposed to the leading intellectual figures and currents of his time. On the European side, his brother Jyotindranath Tagore had introduced him to the writings of P. B. Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, William Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe and various French authors. On the Indian side, there were the Sanskrit scriptures, the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, the Bengali poets and writers such as Biharilal Chakravarti, Micheal Madhushudan Dutta and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, as well as the Bengali nursery rhymes and Baul songs. Tagore’s description of his home Joransanko: “Pandits of the deepest learning would visit father’s drawing room to discuss the scriptures and the sciences; musicians would display their skill. Such people made of our house a living university.” (Tagore1940)
Sarada Devi, Rabindranath’s mother was a woman of considerable character and patience who kept a household together and in harmony. Her health had broken down after the birth of the fifteenth child. She had to supervise a vast household, with many sons, daughters, sons-in-law daughters-in-law and their children. Several of her children were brilliant, while some struggled though being no less intellectually inferior. Each of them had problems of their own, but she tackled it with a great amount of flexibility and patience. She died in 1875 when Rabindranath Tagore was only 14 years old.

Dwijendranath Tagore (1840-1926) was the eldest brother of Rabindranath Tagore. He was a man of remarkable intellect, poet, musician, philosopher and mathematician as well. His experiments in poetic composition left a deep impression on the poetic development of his youngest brother Rabindranath Tagore. Satyendranath Tagore (1842-1923) is remembered as the first Indian to break into the strong hold of Indian Civil Service. He was a scholar in Sanskrit. He was also competent in English and Bengali language. He directly and indirectly influenced the development of his younger brother Rabindranath Tagore as a man. Rabindranath Tagore’s first journey to England was in the company of Satyendranath and Jnanadanandini Devi and their two children. Hemendranath Tagore (1844-1884) died young at the age of forty. He was in charge of directing the studies of little Rabi and his companions. He insisted that the children should be taught in their mother tongue and not English. Jyotindranath Tagore (1849-1925) was a multifaceted genius. He was a composer, a musician, a poet, a dramatist and an artist. Jyotindranath was also a nationalist who experimented with Swadeshi or indigenous products. Rabindranath Tagore was influenced by his brother Jyotindranath in many ways. Rabindranath credits his brother for encouraging his musical talents. Kadambari Devi (1859-1884) Jyotindranath Tagore’s wife profoundly affected his perception and attitudes concerning women. Kadambari Devi became Rabindranath Tagore’s playmate. It was turning point in his life. His sense of isolation was broken with her advent in the family. At almost all evening, Jyotindranath, Kadambari, Rabindranath and their friends would meet on the terrace for music and conservation. They worked on dramatic performances at the
family theatre within Jorasanko. Kadambari Devi supplied the emotional stimulus and caressing warmth and shade which he needed most at that age, it was his husband who gave the first necessary discipline and direction to his unformed talent. He did not allow the difference between their ages to stand as a barrier, either in intellectual discussion or in literary creation. Jyotindranath also took him to their family estates at Shelaidah. He taught him to ride and took him on his tiger hunting expeditions. In 1878 he sailed for England, along with his brother Satyendranath Tagore and his family to study law. He returned from England empty handed without any degree in the year 1880.

Rabindranath Tagore received from his family self-confidence which was his greatest gift. Tagore family had been an active participant in the nineteenth century Cultural Revolution in India. Being deeply rooted in Indian traditions they did not feel threatened by the influence of western values. This gave birth to a culture which transcended both the cultures and drew from both.

4.1.3 Rural Experience at Shelaidah

In the year 1883 Rabindranath Tagore got married to eleven year old Bhabatarini Devi. Bhabatarini Devi was renamed as Mrinalini Devi. Mrinalini was compassionate and helpful by nature and she soon became a valued member of Joransanko. She was not formally educated but later she became proficient in English and Sanskrit. In 1890 Rabindranath Tagore was put in charge of the family’s rural properties at Shelaidah and Patisar. His aesthetic side was charmed by the beauty of the countryside, but gradually he realized the acute material and cultural poverty of the villages. He wrote in his essay “Palli Prakriti”

“…… The everyday tasks of the village folk and the varied cycle of their work filled me with wonder. Bred in the city, I stepped right into the heart of rural charm and filled myself with it. Then slowly the misery of the people grew vivid before my eyes and I began to wish that I could do something for them…To try to help villagers from the outside could do no good…..It was so
difficult to help them because they did not have much respect for themselves.” (Tagore 1939)

Rabindranath’s first experiments in education were in the area of adult education. He built a village center at Shelaidah. He hired teacher and tried to introduce collective farming, but the villagers were suspicious of one another so it was not successful. But these experiences made him determined to do something about rural uplift. Besides this he also started a ‘Home School’ for his children. It was here that Rabindranath first got involved with education directly. He writes in his essay “The Teacher” that he felt compelled to break out of the seclusion of his literary and spiritual endeavours and take his part in the world of practical activities. Rathindranath has written how his father experimented with new teaching methods in the home school. Tagore also hired teachers like Mr. Lawrence as English tutor, Jagadananda Roy for Mathematics and Shivadhan Vidiyarnava as Sanskrit teacher. Rabindranath himself taught Bengali to the students.

4.1.4 Educational Writings

Rabindranath Tagore was a famous poet, dramatist and novelist. His world famous book ‘Gitanjali’ published in 1909. An English edition of ‘Gitanjali’ was published in 1912. In 1919 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Rabindranath Tagore’s writing between 1882 and 1900 was characterized by Orientalism. Between 1886 and 1898 his writings became critical of the revivalist movement through various satires. He wrote in favor of scientific knowledge and the need for a fusion of the east and the west. His early writings do not deal with education; there are occasional references to the failure of the existing educational system. In 1892 Shikshar Herfer was published. It was Tagore’s criticism of the existing system of education which was read at a public meeting in Rajshahi in 1892. In this address he focused on certain central themes which formed the basis of his educational thinking throughout his life. They were: the necessity of education in mother tongue, the need to develop a language to express the cultural ethos, the need for shaping the curriculum according to the needs of the environment and the need for a joyful and open ended learning atmosphere. In
Siksha Samasya (1906) Rabindranath Tagore gives the first detailed public statement concerning the development of an alternative educational model. In the first section, he discusses the inappropriateness of the European system of education because of its disaffection from the history and social life of India. He argued for an educational system based on Indian history and traditions. Rabindranath Tagore advocates a system which would provide lively and varied courses which nourish the heart as well as intellect, an atmosphere where no disunity or discord disrupts the mind and a curriculum which is realistic, light and based on the needs of the society. The learning environment which fulfills these needs is an ashram setting where teacher, pupils live together surrounded by an atmosphere of culture with no luxury to distract their attention. In this essay Rabindranath develops his ideas concerning the importance of nature in education. In Tapoban (1910) Tagore elaborates the special role of nature in education. He introduced new educational aspect in this writing that is “cultivation of feeling” (bodher tapasya) as opposed to education of senses (indriyer shiksha) and education of intellect (jnaner shiksha). His other educational writings are, Strishiksha (1915), Shikshar Bahan (1915), Sikshar Milan (1931), Shikshar Bikiran(1933), Shiksha and Culture (1935). Besides this he has written numerous articles and essays regarding education in newspapers and journals.

4.1.5 Educational Experiments

The historical stratification of Tagore’s evolution of his educational philosophy can be divided into four different phases. They are –first phase from 1892 to 1904, second phase from 1905 to 1915, the third phase from 1916 to 1933 and the last phase from 1933 to 1941. It is difficult to phase out the exact date of transition from one phase to another.

The beginning of the first phase is marked with the publication of Shikshar Herfer in 1892. He criticized the existing education system in his writings. Before this he reflected on his educational experiences in school and in Europe. All these experiences took a form of critique of education in British India. This was followed by the foundation of Brahmacharyashrama in Santiniketan. On December 22, 1901
Brahmacharyashrama at Santiniketan was established. Tagore’s essay ‘My School’ refers to Santiniketan School, which was then residential in character and modeled on the ancient Gurukula School. It was an Ashramic-School in close contact with nature. The education imparted here was in and through nature. It was a protest against the artificiality of modern life and an effort to revive the ideals and traditions of the past. The objectives were multiple. First purpose was to locate a school for children in the lap of Nature. Secondly, it intended to build a cultural ambience that would be responsive to the Swabhava of this country and its people, their language and culture and thirdly to emulate a truly Indian concept of Tapovana. The early model for Santiniketan was in many ways a cultural statement of his time based on Hindu nationalism and revivalism.

The second phase of Tagore’s educational thinking begins from 1905. This was in response to the boycott and Swadeshi agitation in Bengal by Lord Curzon. The major thrust of the movement was the establishment of the National Education system. Tagore pointed out three aspects of educational thought during this phase. First, he pointed out the need to connect college education with the life of the nation. Secondly, he stressed on the colonization of education. Thirdly, Tagore was for National Education which will reveal the true Swabhava of the people of India. But gradually he became anxious for a clear conception of what is ‘national’ about National Education. He wrote a series of articles between 1908 and 1915 on the Tapovana concept (1909) Strishiksha (1915), Shikshar Bahan (1915).

The third phase of Tagore’s educational thought was a result of dissatisfaction with the British Indian education system and nationalist alternatives. These dissatisfactions helped him to crystallize into the concept of Visva-Bharati. With the advent of the World War I and Rabindranath’s trips to England, America, and the far east, the scope of this educational vision widened further to activate international understanding and cooperation. On 22nd December 1921, Visva-Bharati was inaugurated twenty years after the founding Brahmacharyashrama. The motto of the university reflected the global scope of the undertaking: Yatra visvam bhavati ekanidam-‘where the world meets in one nest’. Visva-Bharati was to be an experiment in which individuals of
different civilizations and traditions, learned to live together, not on the basis of nationalism but through a wider relationship of humanity. The three objectives for Visva-Bharati: to unite the different streams of culture in India and to link them all with the global civilization of mankind; to create opportunity for the generation of knowledge and to connect the above endeavours with living reality through the application of knowledge to the daily life and work of common people.

The last phase of Tagore’s educational thought focused on Lokshiksha or people’s education. Rabindranath Tagore’s rural reconstruction efforts gained momentum in 1919 when he met Leonard Elmhirst a British agronomist studying at Cornell. Rabindranath Tagore took his help to open the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Sriniketan in February 1922. The main purpose was rural reconstruction and village upliftment. To Rabindranath Tagore, education meant all round development of personality through education of intellect, mind, body and feeling. Santiniketan represents education of the mind, heart and soul. Visva-Bharati stands for education of the intellect, meeting place of the east and the west, national integration and international amity. Sriniketan represents education based on skills. The three institutions combined together to make education complete and total. Rabindranath Tagore’s contribution in the field of education will be discussed in details in later chapters. He breathed his last in the year 1941.

4.2 Life Sketch of Maria Montessori

In 1870 Italy became a nation in its own right. This was the year Maria Montessori was born. Montessori was born on August 31, in the year 1870 in Chiaravalle Italy. Alessandro Montessori father of Montessori was an official of the Ministry of Finance. Her mother, Renilde Stoppani, was a well-educated woman. Her father was frequently transferred to various places which gave Maria a chance to have education in big cities throughout Italy.
4.2.1 Early Life

The Montessori family moved to Florence in 1873 and then to Rome in 1875. She was five years old when the family moved to Rome. Montessori entered a public elementary school at the age of six. She went to school there and did well at school because she loved reading and learning. Her love of learning and independent worldview was unusual for young girls of that period. However, Maria Montessori did not enjoy school. In Italy school learning at that time, consisted mostly of drilling and memorization. It is said that Maria Montessori as a child declared that she would never become famous because she did not want children of future be burdened with another biography to memorize. She also did not want to be a teacher. Maria Montessori contracted life threatening illness when she was ten years old, but it is said that she told her parents not to worry. She also informed them that she could not die because she had many things to do.

Italy was very conservative in its attitude towards and treatment of women, during those days. At the age of thirteen Montessori entered a secondary technical school, Regia Scuola Technica Michelangelo Buonarroti. She studied Italian, geometry, accounting, history, geography, arithmetic, algebra, physics, chemistry, botany, geometric and ornate drawing, zoology and two foreign languages in that school. She did well in the sciences and especially in mathematics. Engineering was the field of study she wanted to pursue, which was a very unusual aspiration for a woman during that time.

In 1890 she graduated with a certificate in physics and mathematics. She decided to study medicine an even more unusual aspiration given the cultural setup in Italy during that period. In 1890 she enrolled in the University of Rome for a degree course in natural sciences. She earned her diploma dilicenza in 1892. This degree along with additional studies in Italian and Latin, qualified her for entrance into the medical program at the University in 1893. It was unprecedented for a young woman in Italy to study medicine. Nevertheless, Maria Montessori fought against the many obstacles
placed in her way, but it is said that she finally achieved her goal by appealing to the Pope.

Eventually, Maria Montessori began her medical studies, but there were more challenges to overcome for her. These included the opposition of her father, who accompanied her to and from university as a courtesy, but barely had he spoken to her. She also faced hostility from some medical students and professors for being a female. When she attended lectures, she could only enter the hall after the male students had taken their seats. The male students ridiculed her because a woman could not look at a naked body in the presence of men. Her presence in classes where dissections of naked body were carried out was deemed inappropriate. She was required to perform her dissections alone after hours. She undertook her anatomy studies alone working with cadavers in the evening by candlelight. In order to overcome the odor of formaldehyde, she resorted to smoking. Despite these hurdles Maria Montessori remained charming and gracious. Montessori won an academic prize in her first year and in 1895 secured an appointment as a hospital assistant, gaining early clinical experience. She studied pediatrics and psychiatry during her last two years. Montessori graduated from the University of Rome in 1896 as a doctor of medicine. She found employment as an assistant at the University hospital.

4.2.2 Early Career and Family Life

Dr. Montessori worked as a clinician in the field of family medicine, especially among the socially disadvantaged women and children. Many people in Italy at that time lived below the poverty line. Social disorder and unrest were everywhere. Housing in poor areas was below standard. Malnutrition and diseases such as tuberculosis were very common. Stories abound of young Dr. Montessori not only treating her patients, but also preparing their food, doing housework and nursing them back to health. She began to travel, study, speak and publish nationally and internationally. She became an advocate for social reform, particularly as it related to the wellbeing of women and children. Enhancing the quality of the environment for the children in which they were raised was the key to overcoming the ills of human society, including poverty,
inequality, mental illness, criminality and even war was her argument. This became her argument and the foundation of work in later life. Dr. Montessori argued for the emancipation and education of women and children, for equal pay for equal work, for antenatal and postnatal care, for improved standards, housing, childcare, nutrition and education. She was also a passionate opponent of child labour, she was particularly against the use of children as labourers in mines and heavy industry at that time. Even a hundred years on, at the dawn of the twenty-first century Dr. Montessori’s vision is yet to be realized. Young Dr. Montessori eloquently presented her ideas at women’s Congresses and at gatherings of academics, social and political leaders and royalties across Europe. She was a wonderful orator and she continued to give inspiring lectures and talks throughout her life.

Maria Montessori never entered into a married life. She had an affair with Giuseppe Montesano a fellow doctor. She would be expected to stop working if she got married to him. Montessori continued with her studies and work. On 31st March 1898 she gave birth to a son named Mario Montessori. Being a single mother was a great struggle during that time. She left her child in foster care with a family living in the countryside. She got reunited with her son in his teenage. Later, his son proved to be a great assistant to her research work in the field of education.

4.2.3 Special Education and Maria Montessori

Dr. Montessori specialized in pediatrics and psychiatry and developed a keen interest in children who were diagnosed as retarded and challenged. She believed that solutions to the problems faced by differently abled children were to be found through education, rather than medical intervention. It was through her work with differently abled children that Maria Montessori was drawn to the field of education.

Montessori worked and researched with so called ‘phrenasthenic’ children (in modern terms, children experiencing some form of mental retardation, illness or disability). Dr. Montessori’s engagement with so called ‘deficient’ children (as they were called at that time), led her to attend courses in anthropology and pedagogy at the University of Rome. Through her anthropological studies Maria Montessori refined her skills in
observation and measurement. During this stage, she also read widely becoming familiar with the ideas of educational reformers who preceded her, including Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart and Froebel. She was especially influenced, however, by the ideas of two little known French doctors, Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin.

Maria Montessori, enriched by her research became convinced of the need for special schools for the ‘education of the feeble minded’. By the late 1890’s she was a well-known personality and regarded as a specialist. She was acknowledged as an authority on special education for deficient children. In 1898 her article ‘Social Miseries and New scientific Discoveries’ were widely acknowledged. She was invited to address this theme at a National Pedagogical Congress in Turin, which led to further acclaim. Montessori highlighted the necessity of employing a scientific approach to meet the needs of the retarded children were to be met. She argued that “our efforts will have to go into gaining an understanding of those children who have the most difficulty adapting to society and helping them before they got into trouble.” (Kramer 1988) In 1900 Montessori was appointed as the Director of the new Orthophrenic School. It was attached to the University of Rome. It was a municipal asylum for the ‘deficient and insane’ children of the city. Montessori discovered that her young patients needed purposeful activities to stimulate their senses and mind, and develop their sense of self-esteem and achievement. She was greatly inspired by the work of the physicians and educators like Jean Marc Gaspard Itard and Edouard Sequin. They gave her a new dimension in thinking and helped her to focus on children with learning difficulties. She applied programs which combined scientific observation and measurement. It led to pedagogical innovations from her own and earlier eras. As a result of Dr. Montessori’s unusual methods of teaching deficient children gained increasing levels of social and personal independence. They also succeeded in state examinations at the same level as normal children. She almost surprised the whole world when many of these mentally disabled children were able to pass the standardized exams taken by the Italian public schools after two years. Montessori was highly respected and invited as guest speaker throughout Europe to lecture on children’s right, women’s movement, peace education and highlight the importance of the League of Nations.
4.2.4 Casa dei Bambini and Spread of Montessori Education

In 1906 Montessori was invited to look after the education of a group of children of working parents in a new apartment for low income families in the San Lorenzo district in Rome. In 1906 the first Casa dei Bambini (Children’s House) was established under Montessori’s guidance. She was able to apply her method to around 50 normal children aged between 2 to 7 years. She combined the liberal ideas of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel’s child principles with some practical activities and activities to train the senses.

In 1906 Montessori got the opportunity to apply her method on normal children Maria Montessori’s first Casa dei Bambini became famous in the entire world in a very short span of time. Thousands of visitors went away amazed and enthused after the success of her first school she had established. Her system worked in so many different settings. Montessori became the interest of leaders and scientists all around the world. Numerous publications and articles were written about her and by her. This made Maria Montessori a well-known personality to both parents and teachers alike.

From the opening of the first Casa dei Bambini in 1907 to the outbreak of the World War I Maria Montessori became world famous to a degree which was extraordinary at that time. The Casa dei Bambini became a model school. It was visited by educators and researchers from all over the world. International renown and recognition followed rapidly. The success of pedagogical innovations gave birth to the “Montessori Method”. The methods were popularized by the press as well as enthusiastic followers of the “Montessori Movement”, which started spreading worldwide. Schools, associations, and societies were set up in different corners of the world as America, Russia, Japan and India.

Montessori teacher training programmes were established and Montessori schools appeared throughout the world. At the height of her fame in United Kingdom in 1914 and 1915, Montessori travelled to the U.S.A where she gave public lectures, published articles, ran training courses and open demonstrative classes. In the United States her work was supported by President Wilson and famous personalities like Thomas
Edison, Alexander Graham Bell and Hellen Keller. Professor John Dewey introduced her when she spoke at Canegie Hall.

In the first thirty years of the twentieth century the Montessori Method seemed to offer something for everyone. Conservative school of thought valued the quiet, responsible behavior of the little children along with their passion for work. People with a liberal approach highly praised her freedom and spontaneity of approach. Many political leaders and educationists saw it as a means to reform the old fashioned school systems of Europe, North America and Asia. They hoped that such an approach would lead to a more hardworking peace loving and disciplined population. Scientist of all disciplines praised Maria’s objectivity and experimental foundation of the Montessori Method. The number of Montessori schools soared up to 1000 by 1925 and many tens of thousands around the world. But things took a dramatic turn by the end of 1930s. Montessori schools, however quickly waned in the United States. Maria Montessori refused to allow children in her schools to be part of the fascist youth movement. The expansion of fascism in Europe resulted in the burning of her books from Berlin to the Netherlands, where Montessori Method had a popular support. Despite many reversals of fortune, Montessori school continued to be popular in Europe and the United Kingdom.

4.2.5 Montessori and India

In 1939 Maria Montessori was invited to India by the Theosophical Society president George Sydney Arundale to conduct a Montessori Training course at Adyar. Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi felt that the Montessori Method could be used to help address the needs of the huge illiterate masses of India. Rabindranath Tagore also accepted to be a patron of the first Indian Training Course in Education conducted by Montessori which took place in Adyar from November 1939 to February 1940. Montessori along with her son Mario was in India during the outbreak of the World War II. Since they were Italians they were interned by the British colonial government in India as an enemy alien. Mario was interned in a camp for civilians in Ahmednagar and Maria confined to the Theosophical Society compound
at Adyar. She was allowed to spend the hot summer months at the hill stations of Ooty and Kodaikanal. Maria was very unhappy that she and her son were treated as prisoners. Finally, on 31 August 1940 the British freed her son Mario. The mother and son spent the remaining war years in India. Between 1939 and 1949 Maria Montessori conducted sixteen Indian Montessori Training Courses with the help of her son Mario. This led to a very sound foundation of the Montessori Movement in India. While they were in India, Maria and Mario Montessori developed a curriculum for older children from 6 to 12 years of age. Dr. Montessori called this curriculum Cosmic Education because it was designed to nourish the limitless curiosity of older children. Much of the curriculum is aligned with the interest the children in Indian schools displayed for the animals and plants of the natural world as well as for the earth as a whole and its place in the universe. She also held training courses in Madras, Kodaikanal, Karachi and Ahmedabad in India. After the war she resumed her travels world-wide and was honored with many public and academic awards.

4.2.6 Later Years

Montessori schools began to reopen across Europe and Dr. Montessori continued her work, developing her pedagogy, visiting Montessori schools, lecturing and acting as an advocate for children all over the world. In 1945 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization was established to rebuild a culture of peace in the whole world through education. Montessori was directly involved with it. In 1949 she addressed the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, in 1950 she became a member of the Italian delegation to the Conference in Florence and in 1951 she participated at the first meeting of the UNESCO Governing body in Wiesbaden Germany. Montessori spoke more and more in her later years about her educational method which was connected to the world peace. She was nominated for Noble Peace Prize for three consecutive years 1949, 1950, and 1951. She continued working and travelling until she died at the age of 81 in Holland 1952. After her death Dr. Montessori’s son, colleagues and supporters continued her work.
4.3 Meeting of Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori

Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori were pioneers in the field of innovative education. They mutually respected each other. According to Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, the biographer of Rabindranath Tagore, Tagore first met Maria Montessori in England in 1912. Rabindranath Tagore wrote an essay in Bengali on Montessori education system with the title “Montessori Shikshapranali”. This essay was published in Tattvabodhini Patrika, Bhadra, and 1835 Shaka (1320 B.S).

In 1916, Rabindranath Tagore went to the U.S.A for raising funds for his school Santiniketan. On November 4th, 1916, Tagore delivered a lecture on “The Cult of Nationalism” at Pabst Theatre of Milwaukee, Wisconsin State. On 6th November ‘Milwaukee, Wisconsin’ published brief news of a meeting between Tagore and Montessori - “Rabindranath…… received Madam Montessori at the Hotel Pfister late in the afternoon and the interview between the famous educators was full of interest.”(Paul, P.K 2002)

In 1926 Rabindranath visited Italy at the invitation of Mussolini. There he had a chance of meeting Maria Montessori for the third time. Tagore held Maria Montessori’s educational system in very high esteem, but ‘regretted that present Government system in India did not allow this method to be extensively followed. The Montessori Method was considered expensive’ (Gupta 2015).

In 1929 the first International Montessori Congress was held in Elsinore Denmark. Montessori and her son Mario founded the ‘Association Montessori Internationale’ or AMI in Amsterdam, Netherlands to look after the activities of schools and societies all over the world and to supervise the training of the teachers. Early patrons of AMI included Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget and Rabindranath Tagore. Both the educators were in constant touch with each other throughout their lives which is evident from the various letters of communication between Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori.
Tagore was supportive of Montessori’s efforts, agreeing to become a patron of the Teacher’s Training Course which she delivered in Adyar India in 1939. During Montessori’s stay in India Rabindranath sincerely wished to bring Montessori to Santiniketan which did not materialize. Rabindranath passed away in 1941 when Montessori was in India. Montessori expressed her tribute to Rabindranath in the following words:

“There are two kinds of tears, one from the common side of life, and these tears everybody can master. But there are other tears which come from God. Such tears are the expression of one’s very heart, one’s very soul. These are the tears which come with something that uplifts humanity and these tears are permitted. Such tears I have at this moment.” (Montessori 1941)

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter a brief biographical outline of the two leading educators Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori have been traced in detail. The two educators were born in two different continents of the world. They were brought up in the different social set up. Rabindranath Tagore was born in a family which on the one hand inherited legacy of rich Indian culture and on the other hand did not hesitate to welcome modernism, freshly arrived from Europe. Rabindranath Tagore’s experience with formal education was not a very pleasant one. He dedicated his life to establish an alternative form of education at Santiniketan. It aimed at promoting social and environmental harmony. Through Visva-Bharati he wanted to establish a living relationship between East and West to promote international amity and understanding. Sriniketan was established by him to fulfill the needs of rural India. By establishing Sriniketan he managed to enrich the composite culture of India as well as the world.

Maria Montessori grew up in a country considered most conservative in its attitude toward women, yet even against the considerable opposition Montessori pursued scientific education and was the first women to become a physician in Italy. She evolved the Montessori Method of education through various experiments. Her
method spread and gained popularity throughout the world. She was not only a pioneer but went on to become one of the leading educators of the world.

Both Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori met each other on several occasions exchanging their views on education. They kept in touch with each other through correspondences and regarded each other with high esteem. For a comparative analysis of the educational ideas and practices of Rabindranath Tagore and Maria Montessori it is necessary to take a deeper look into their educational philosophies. It is imperative to understand the fundamental principles of their educational philosophies. The next chapter takes a closer look into their educational philosophies and principles.
Chapter References


