

# THE KODAIKANAL EXPERIENCE: CHAPTER I

## KAHN-WIKRAMARATNE INTERVIEW

*The Kodaikanal years were from late 1942 to March, 1944, a period of internment for Maria Montessori against her will in India. Yet in these remote hills, a fanfare and training course emerged, and so did the inspiration for an indepth unification principle for the elementary program which we now loosely call Cosmic Education.*

*These two interviews with Lena Wikramaratne and Mario Montessori Sr. capture a period of new thinking about Montessori education that personifies the interdependent components of land and water, air and energy, animals and plants, alongside the human-made world. Both Mario and Maria Montessori lived near a complex that housed families with children from infancy to age eighteen, and this location is considered to be the inspiration for their emerging insights around childhood and adolescence.*

DAVID KAHN: The Kodaikanal experience was instrumental to the completion of the Cosmic Education ideal. Miss Lena, you worked closely with Dr. Montessori and these children in the realization of this integrated, cultural approach. Can you begin with a little history about Dr. Montessori in India?

LENA WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, you see, I had searched for Dr. Maria Montessori once before and wrote to all the embassies of the world. None of the embassies knew where she was at that time. The war was on. A friend told me that they had seen a piece in the paper saying something about Dr. Maria Montessori visiting the Theosophical Headquarters at Madras. I wrote. I received a letter saying yes, she was there with her son. The letter said that no courses would be given that year because, unfortunately, something had happened. Mario, her son, was put into an Italian detention camp because of the Italians coming into the war.

That was 1940. Then I received a second letter stating Mario was returned but she had to recuperate and she didn't know when the next course would be given. Then I received a third letter by the end of the year saying the next year they would be having the course. So I went. In the first three lectures, she gave this wonderful cosmic view of the child, showing how the child is more than just something that

plays or something you just enjoy. She saw things differently. The child had a real mission to perform which was the making of the human personality, and that there were great depths in spite of what we see as dependency and simplicity. Dr. Montessori saw a great potential in the child. The first three lectures were beautiful. I had been working with two educators from the West, from London University and from the University of Chicago who had been giving us some lectures on preschool education and Dr. Montessori was so much better.

KAHN: What were these Western educators saying?

WIKRAMARATNE: The professor from England had been sent through some kind of exchange for university people. Another was a woman from Wheaton, Illinois, who had been sent on an exchange fellowship. The two got together and were giving a survey of modern trends in education, which I began to follow at the university because I had been doing some teaching at the time. I disagreed with them because they felt that the child between two and seven years needed only fantasy and play. The English professor was saying we should have sand boxes and water play and stories and whatever; rolling toys, gross muscular movement; old tires to roll, etc. And I would think of our children running up and down hills, climbing trees; why should I

have to put them in these sand boxes? The American professor was telling us that John Dewey developed preschool education with a singular environment of toys and home artifacts, such as mommy's hat, clothes, shoes for dressing up fantasies. They also had toy utensils for simulating housework because their whole idea was that the child imitates everything that the adult does.

KAHN: This was the Dewey environment.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes. One day, I made my fellow teachers furious. I challenged the idea of just keeping children happy in school. The child didn't come to the world just to be happy. My father and my mother brought me up exposing me to everything about the world. I am still eager to learn because of that interest that had been imparted to me. And I said where in your program do you communicate interest in the environment around you? I didn't know very much about the potential of the child except what I remembered from childhood. My parents were full of interest and they gave me interests in everything when I was very young and taught me many things. My father was an agriculturist. He was interested in industry, economics, and history; he gave us all of that when we were very young. So I thought then that children were eager to learn. Why can't children have the same interest in learning as adults have? What has gone wrong? I asked one professor and she said she did not know. So these two people, great educationists and philosophers from the West, couldn't tell me anything. I was so happy I found Dr. Montessori.

KAHN: You found Dr. Montessori in 1941; did you get to meet her personally?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, when they wrote me that letter, I immediately gave my resignation from my teaching contract. Everyone thought I was crazy!

KAHN: Was this an unconventional thing to be doing, taking this Montessori training?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, but when I heard from them, they said that the Indian government had sent many, many teachers to listen because she was giving this marvelous psychology of the child. I went on my own, of course, from Sri Lanka through to Madras, then met the two of them. I still remember the first day I saw her. The Theosophical Headquarters had cement floors, woven bamboo walls, and

roofs for big conventions. Three hundred students had arrived for that course; and we lived in little rooms like this (office size) two in each.

KAHN: How did she achieve this stature in India so quickly?

WIKRAMARATNE: That is a long story. You see, she was lecturing in England and this was after the Civil War in Spain. She had come in touch with the Theosophical Society in England. It was founded by Ann Besant in collaboration with a Colonel Olcott. They felt that if they could bring all religions under one common roof, then people would not have the antagonisms and tensions. They also felt why wait until adulthood to transmit these ideals. She and Dr. Montessori were hoping to communicate peace through the child. Dr. Montessori was saying that peace can only come through the child. Then after establishing this contact with the Theosophical Society in London, later on George Arundale who had operated the Theosophical school in London, invited Dr. Montessori to India when he became president of the organization.

KAHN: So this was the root of the Montessori following in India. Montessori really stemmed from the Theosophical Society and was not promoted by any educational movement.

WIKRAMARATNE: That is correct.

KAHN: What was your training like with Dr. Montessori?

WIKRAMARATNE: Oh, the delight, the pleasure, the joy, the wonderful vision that I was able to get from the first three lectures. I kept on each week saying, I have to stay with you, I have to stay with you. This course of four and one half months is not enough for me. And of all the 350 people who took the course, I was the only one who told her that. They gave us pieces of paper, the diplomas, after the course and I said I didn't want it; I have to come back to Dr. Montessori. I was able to learn so much. Dr. Montessori was speaking Italian and I had studied Latin and could follow the gist of what she was saying, and Mario, of course, in stumbling English, usually translated. So I would write every word she said and I used to write every word Mario said. I would go over notes all the night long and write my own lecture, which we had to turn in. I used to watch the presentation carefully. All the



Silent prayer before dining, Sophia College, Bombay, around 1942

students used to go away after the lecture; I would run up there and work with my notes and that was the only practice I did. We had only three sets of materials for 350 people. If I didn't do that, I would never have gotten my hands on those materials. And then I would sit on my own little cot and pore over the psychology and philosophy and write my exercises. That is the way I did it.

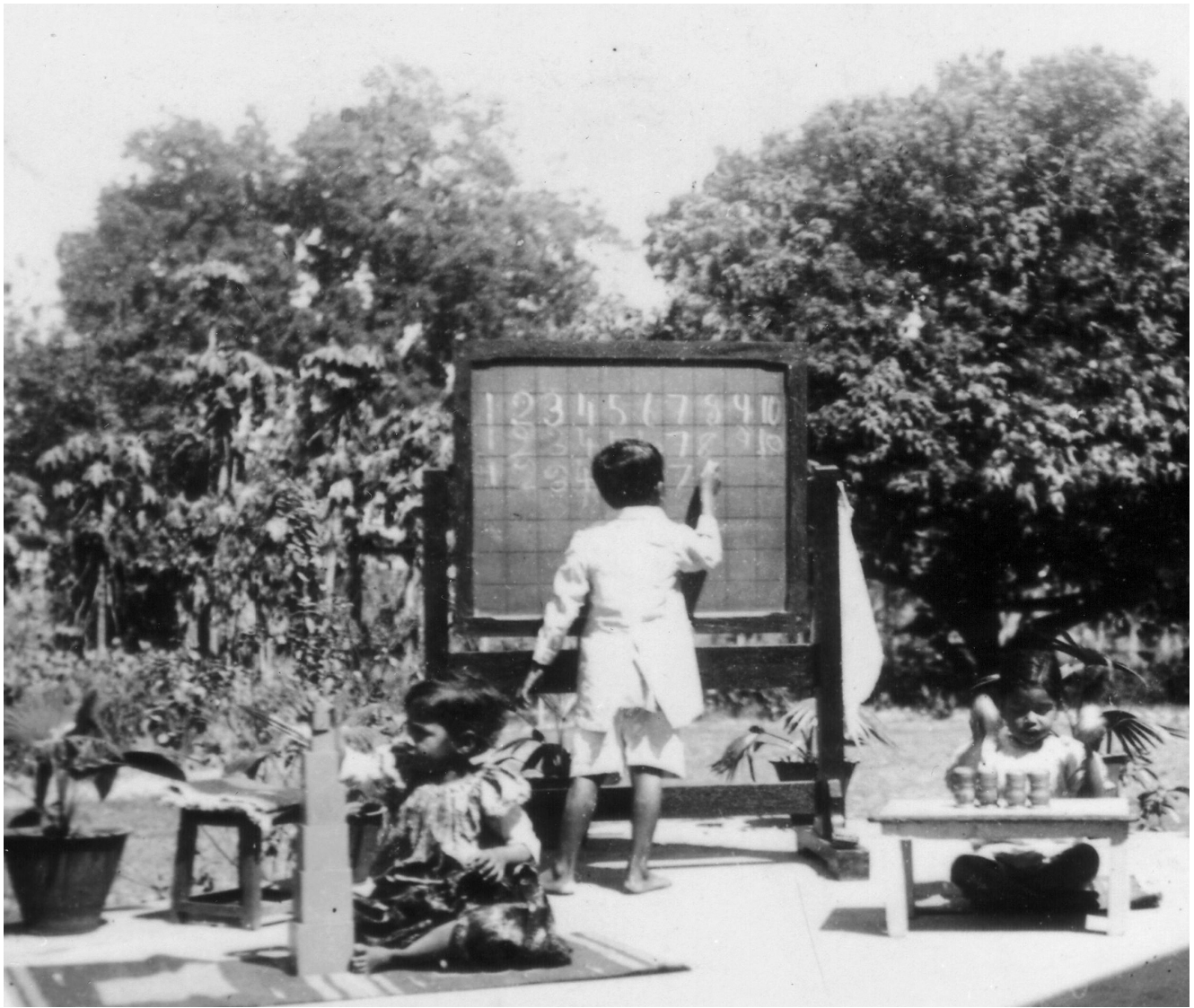
At the end of the course, we received phone calls and letters from the civic authorities saying that all foreigners had to leave Madras within 48 hours because the Japanese had bombed us. This was the beginning of 1942. Immediately the Theosophical Society took responsibility for looking after Maria. With the British government's help, they planned to send her up to Kodaikanal, which was in the hills. I had to go. I found the city on the map and wired my father. He came. I told him I had to be with those people. This was what I wanted. My father stayed and listened to the lectures. He was a man who loved children, not only his; he was interested in all children. He said with the war and with the Japanese bombing he wouldn't take me there. I told him I didn't want to lose them. I won't be able to learn what I want to learn now. I was

just infused with this whole thing. And I said I am not taking my degree; I don't want it. I must go to Kodaikanal. That week, I received a letter from a cousin of mine whom I thought was in North India in Simla. But he had been sent to a new university which was three miles away from Kodaikanal down the mountainside. He said "I am here now for my philosophy course. Before you go back to Sri Lanka, come and see me."

KAHN: That was lucky!

WIKRAMARATNE: It was a God-send. So I showed the letter to Papa and he said we would take the train and go around and then we would fly back to Sri Lanka. We took the train to Kodaikanal. And upon arriving, there was the seminary director, a Frenchman called Father Guthier. I am mentioning him because he is a famous historian and an anthropologist. Papa and he just got on beautifully. When Papa told him about me, he said why do you have to worry. You can leave her with me; I will look after her. That is how I came back to Dr. Montessori. The priest found me a home in a cottage close by to where they were, by the lake, which was beautiful. Often I used to run down the hill to their house which





Working outside, Allahabad, India, 1928

the Theosophical Society had given them. And she asked me, what can I do here? I can't give a course; all I can do if you come to me in the evenings is talk and show you some material.

KAHN: You worked alone?

WIKRAMARATNE: No, Dr. Montessori asked me to bring another woman and her two children who had come from Calcutta. Also a European woman arrived with two of her children. And with those four children I started a little school in the tiny cottage.

KAHN: So your cottage, Maria Montessori and her family, yourself and these four children—this is how it all started.

WIKRAMARATNE: That is right. Dr. Montessori showed me all this elementary material. She talked about her vision. But I wanted to try things out. I've got to work with children to see this actually happening. I want to see the spontaneous activity. I wanted to see it happening.

KAHN: How old were these children?

WIKRAMARATNE: There was a girl who was four. Another girl four and one half. The boys were three and two and one half. I loved that. I was the first to work with two year olds. Many European schools were not taking children until they were four.

KAHN: Did the school expand?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes. Kodaikanal was a place where English, American, Swedish, and Dutch had their own schools for their older children; but the babies were not in school. So when they saw me starting this little place with four children, within a week I had fifteen. They brought their babies to me. Gradually, Dr. Montessori gave me guidance in the evenings which kept her busy, for she had been quite depressed being forced to live on this mountaintop. The Theosophical Society had given her a marvelous American girl, Norma Makey, to help Dr. Montessori write her books. She was revising old material resulting in two new publications, the *Absorbent Mind* and the *Discovery of the Child*. Norma Makey was the editor and translator. We all kept Dr. Montessori busy those years from 1931-1944.

KAHN: So now you had fifteen children, and you supervised them all.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, and every night I would go to Dr. Montessori and tell her what happened that day with the children. Little by little, the parents who were sending those babies saw what a great thing it was. We used to go out for rambles, or walks, every day. At noontime, Mario joined us and showed them leaves and flowers and we would go fishing in the pond and bring the pond animals home. Dr. Montessori made aquariums and terrariums, even for the little ones. So parents said, "If you can do so much for the little ones, can you take my older child? This child is not good in mathematics; this child is bad in spelling; this child is having trouble in reading."

KAHN: Now you had very few materials, as I recall.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, Dr. Montessori had one set of materials and my father ordered one set for me from Adyar. The rest of the card materials, we made each day. When material making became so profuse, I called another girl from Sri Lanka who could draw for me. I also took a male artist from Kodaikanal and a carpenter to make the materials.

KAHN: Impressive. I'm told that the Kodaikanal experience generated the botany materials, the story of the universe, geography charts, that sort of thing. Is that right? How did it happen?

WIKRAMARATNE: When people saw how these children who first came for some tutoring began

to work, and how they blossomed, they wished to remove them from the schools. They came to me and asked, "Can you take them on for higher work, totally?" So I went to Dr. Montessori: What do we do with these older children? I won't have books to teach them. She said, "You have the best book, the book of the world, which is the book of nature. Don't worry, take them. You can find English material. English is fine for doing reading, writing and all kinds of literature. Father Guthier said we could have his books from his seminary." The American school had a marvelous library and because there were lots of American children in my school, they said we could use their library books. So by the end of the year, we had 60 children. Amazing, isn't it? And of course, my father thought I was crazy, all these children in a little cottage. So he leased the adjoining building.

KAHN: Were these tuition-paying children?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, they paid us a little. They were all wealthy. We had Americans, Swedes, French, Greek, and English children.

KAHN: How did you deal with the language situation?

WIKRAMARATNE: Most of them know English. Some Indian children didn't, but they picked it up very quickly, so it grew. Anyway, toward the end of the year, we were able to advertise a course. So Indians came to take the course, in which I assisted. Some of them brought their own children, so we had lots of Indian children too.

KAHN: Did Mario take on teaching responsibility every day?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, every day he would come to the school. We used to go together and pick the moss and marsh plants and come back and make the terrariums and the aquariums. We used to bring samples from nature and keep them to let the children see the different ways of life.

KAHN: Part of Cosmic Education is the Story of the Universe. Where do you think that originated? Did that come from the Kodaikanal experience too?

WIKRAMARATNE: No, that idea Dr. Montessori had before, but she had never been able to put it together and give it as a course, until what happened at

Kodaikanal. During the first two years with the children, we had made so much material for geography, for botany, for biology, exploring scientific nomenclature. We planted the beds according to the natural order of plants, out in the garden. For the geography, Mario built whole structures with rock, clay, and wood to show the formation of mountains and what happens to clay soil and sandy soil in the sun.

KAHN: So you were making real materials and creating real experiences in nature. This is somewhat of a contrast to the approach to Cosmic Education in our present training. We were not trained in this manner.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, it is wrong the way the natural sciences are given in training now. I have to say it: Because of what trainees are getting in how to present classified terms to the child. But they themselves do not know that much about nature. They must go out into the natural world or else they won't be able to show anything to the child. And that's where it begins.

KAHN: Then they really don't have enough experience. So the children learn the classifications before they learn the lore and the common names.

WIKRAMARATNE: This is unfortunate. The orientation of the world must come first, before you begin to classify. So what is going to happen, unfortunately, will be that the elementary classes will be limited to the knowledge that they have gained in the junior course and that knowledge will be like textbooks.

KAHN: Well now, the training courses argue that they have developed key materials which isolate universal facts of nature.

WIKRAMARATNE: We had developed them in Kodaikanal; there was nothing more to develop. That's why she said, after two years of developing, "Lena, we made all this. Why don't we give the junior course?"

KAHN: What in relation to elementary materials had been made before Kodaikanal? What was the real contribution of Kodaikanal? Wasn't there already a junior curriculum derived from Mrs. Joosten's work in Holland?

WIKRAMARATNE: Dr. Montessori had ideas as to how to develop the curriculum for the older

child. They had done some experimentation in Laren, Holland, where they had done some of the biology material. We had that. Some of the mathematics had been done in Spain. That is where she wrote *Psychoarithmetic*. They had some of the key materials already made. But when coming to Kodaikanal a whole new world opened up for Mario. He was mostly experimenting and seeing how it was classified. So we started from scratch in every subject.

KAHN: Using these key materials you made in Kodaikanal, aren't they the same key materials that are being presented now?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes.

KAHN: However, those were spontaneously evolved with the children. Now the materials that we are working with are fixed materials that are in fact taught to the children.

WIKRAMARATNE: That's what I was objecting to. Because they are teaching nowadays. They are not exploring. They are not discovering.

KAHN: So your ideal situation would be for the teachers to be trained with key materials but they should evolve their own materials out of their own experiences?

WIKRAMARATNE: No, not evolve. Know how to discern the world of nature with those classifications that she gives you. We didn't go to teach the child the parts of the flower. We collected flowers and brought them in. I still do that with my own trainees in Kansas City and San Francisco. I go out and collect the leaves. Then we say, what shape is this or that. Then we refer to the cabinet of leaves. What is happening now is they are learning a linear leaf from the leaf cabinet and then looking to see if it exists in the world of nature. The vision, the preparation, must be there before you begin to classify.

KAHN: You have the total picture first and then classify. We do that to some degree but not enough. If you were to design a training program based on Kodaikanal, what would be your approach?

WIKRAMARATNE: I'm trying to do it in a little way by giving special study courses on geography, geology, botany, zoology, and astronomy. So I am doing it during the summer weeks. After a series of eight lectures, I'll get the trainees in and I tell them,



let's go for a ramble first and bring back all kinds of plants. I tell them what are the differences you see in the stems and leaves, etc. I do as much as I can on an observation basis. And then I tell them to look at the textbooks. What are the classifications in the books. That classification you must put in the materials. Make them yourself; don't only buy it from Nienhuis.

KAHN: In other words, you evolve the materials yourself, based on what the kids find. You make a classification key of plants in the area and that is the real experience.

WIKRAMARATNE: What I was able to discover with the children after we had done that, these nature activities with both the eleven and twelve-year-olds in Kodaikanal and in Sri Lanka was that they were much better than the trainees I had. I got University lecturers to give key lectures; I gave them my whole scheme of cosmic botany. I asked them



Watering, Bombay, India, 1940

to come and give this overall knowledge of botany from this angle of mine—the cosmic view. They were able to lecture. And I sent my eleven- and twelve-year-olds to the same lecture that I sent my trainees. The lecturers told me that my children were better than the adults, because the adults were trying to remember the classifications, whereas the children knew them. And then my eleven- and twelve-year-olds made their own books of botany. They didn't make it in cards; they made them in albums, like you make your own albums. They began with kinds of trees. You can't show the parts of a flower before you have seen many of the kinds of flowers there can be in the world. Then you see all those flowers have the same parts, just like all mankind has a head, shoulders, a neck, two arms, two legs.

KAHN: So you look for a variety to begin with and then you go on from the particulars.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, that is the exact preparation. So the children saw the differences before we showed them how culture has classified them. You see, we couldn't have classified them before we became oriented.

KAHN: In other words, they would say in their own common language what the differences were.

WIKRAMARATNE: They hadn't book knowledge only.

KAHN: Now my training tells me that teaching the key allows them to see more differences. In other words, what they would get from the idea of the petiole would be that there are different kinds of petioles. They may not even have noticed a petiole before until they were given the key.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, but if you give them a whole host of flowers and tell them now what does each one have. Oh, it has this colored part; it has a stem that you can hold. Then you can give them the name petiole. That is the sensorial preparation before giving names.

KAHN: Ok, then you work from experience. You have the real specimen first. That's what they say in my training too.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, but I wouldn't do the specimen like many do at the workshops where they had ordered a hundred tulips from a florist shop.



Lena Wikramaratne reminisces with Mario Montessori, Amsterdam, 1979

KAHN: In other words, go into nature.

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, every flower will have those parts. So why order a hundred tulips or whatever?

KAHN: It should come from an organic experience that is in the child's life.

WIKRAMARATNE: Of course, because that is where we begin from the very first—from birth to three. The child has oriented himself in the world. What does Montessori say? All those impressions are taken in—so now help them to classify. Mario took us out at least once a week and showed us things. It was beautiful. His goal was to widen interest, to give us preparation for the work of seeing and observing nature, and learning how to discern differences before you give the classification of things. So then we came home in the night and talked things out. That was the direction Dr. Montessori gave us—how to put them in different classifications and how to draw them. Mind you, that is why I took on an artist—to do all the cards—the parts of a flower and then the parts of a stem,

parts of a pistil, and on and on until we came to the natural orders.

KAHN: And then this work was since taken by Mario and then institutionalized later on through the Bergamo training. However, you yourself haven't taught much of the junior curriculum since that experience, have you?

WIKRAMARATNE: I did it with my own children in Sri Lanka up to the fifteen-year-olds.

KAHN: Did you have to make materials all over again?

WIKRAMARATNE: Not all, I took some of the material from Kodaikanal and then did some more back in Sri Lanka for the local plants and geography and history. I worked hard on materials. For instance, the History of Life and the World Chart that we show now, we made that from scratch. We bought, or Father Guthier gave us, blank newsprint for material making. And we used lamp-black and dyed it black to show the world before man came. For that scroll chart to show world evolution we



took poster paint and painted on the newsprint. That's the way we did it.

KAHN: You had a scroll chart of the whole development. That's interesting. I guess a new teacher goes through this experience. With your first group of children, you can be spontaneous and develop with the children. Then as you get seasoned in the classroom, some of that is lost. Anyway, the flaws you might be ready to perceive in new training for Cosmic Education are related to the fact that it's not a first-generation discovery and it's got to be transmitted and can't be transmitted except in a fixed manner. Isn't that the way it goes?

WIKRAMARATNE: Yes, but what I would say is, I have been begging that they make it in a two-year course, bring back the teachers so they can come to study the subjects from that cosmic angle by themselves—the geography, the geology. We would set foundations of giving the cosmic view. Let them study their own subjects for one year and find out facts to support the cosmic view.

KAHN: Speaking of the cosmic view which is related to the past geological eras, where do you think that idea comes from in Montessori?

WIKRAMARATNE: From Dr. Montessori. From the very beginning when she saw the normalization of those children in her first experiment. That was the time that she really began to see that those children had something bigger to contribute to the life from that cosmic point of view. So having been a biologist, a scientist, and a mathematician, she began to relate it then to the natural law of order. Then she and Mario came to view it when she saw the children of all

nationalities in Kodaikanal actually giving response to this natural world in the same way. That's the time she said, let's do this advanced course.

KAHN: Cosmic Education, like everything that's inspirational, runs the risk of being packaged and a cliché.

WIKRAMARATNE: It shouldn't be packaged. We have to create people with interest. If you just learn the charts and dump those on the children, what is the interest you have gained? You have to go out. I am writing a little book called *Child Nature and Nurture* and it's a plea for reestablishing relationships between parents, the children, the home, the community, and the whole Earth. Children must go out and explore nature. And every Montessori school should be able to do that.

KAHN: Why did Kodaikanal end?

WIKRAMARATNE: In March of 1944, the war was over and the British government said Montessori could move around.

KAHN: Do you think she was anxious to leave at that point?

WIKRAMARATNE: I think she was tired of being confined. I wanted to stay. But she was interested in visiting my homeland, Sri Lanka. She told me she always wanted to visit the land of Sinbad the Sailor. She had read about the island as a child. So we set off together to find a new work—to collaborate with the child once again—the child in nature, in Sri Lanka, and we found that success repeated itself, and our discovery at Kodaikanal was confirmed.

---

*Miss Lena Wikramaratne (1909-1982) was a student and colleague of Maria Montessori. In 1965 she founded The Montessori Training Center of Northern California with Vera M. Kenison. She was president and director of the Montessori Education Center in Palo Alto, California. Reprinted from The NAMTA Quarterly 5,1 (1979, Fall): 44-54.*

