

MAMMA MONTESSORI - On the occasion of the centenary year of Montessori method of learning, Aditi Shah tracks down schools that were set up nearly half a century ago.

When little children engage in any form of play, there's a lot more to it than meets the eye. Fancy terms like cognitive skills, tactile perception, creative potential etc are not just chic nouveau theories deduced through sophisticated psychological conjecture or sleep mathematical hypothesis. Rather, they were derived from patient observation of a room full of kids, by a tenacious young woman about 100 years ago in Italy . On January 6, 1907, in a building within the slums of Rome , she started a school employing her own innovative system of education. It soon became a social movement of sorts – a pioneer of pre-primary education – which spread across 22,000 schools in over 100 countries. Incidentally her name was Dr. Maria Montessori. The last name must ring a bell.



To commemorate this 100 year milestone, eight Montessori schools from Mumbai conducted a walk down Haji Ali yesterday to generate more awareness about this method of education. (Incidentally, it's not to be confused with 'play way' playschools.) Hundred of students aged between two and a half to seven, teachers, parents and famous faces like Aamir Khan, Om Puri, Suneil Shetty and Zayed Khan were present in the fete. But if the world's first Montessori – Rome 's Casa dei Bambini – is 100 years old, Marine Drive 's Casa Montessori is 73 years old, set up by Dinoo Dubash in 1934. Not far behind is Juhu's Besant Montessori School , at 60, while Casa Bambino at Warden Road is about 40.

It's impressive that a seemingly revolutionary new (we're talking early 1900s) European stream of thought managed to make its way into our country and set up shop so soon after its inception. "At a time when pre-primary education was largely ignored across the world, Dr. Montessori discovered the power of a child's mind; the 'sensitive periods' where they grasp walking and talking, for example; and that children develop in stages 0-6, 6-12, 12-18 years – each of which needs to be handled differently," elaborates Zarine Malva, director of training of the city's only accredited Montessori course (Association Montessori Internationale or AMI) at the Ratan Tata Institute.

"The first Italian Montessoris were devised as school-cum-day care places for children of working class parents. Casa too was initially modelled along the same lines," explains Nazneen Dubash, the late Dinoo Dubash's niece, who's been principal and proprietor of Casa Montessori since 1989. Among the who's who of their infant alumni have been Ratan Tata and Zubin Mehta. Explains Dolly Wadia, director of Juhu's Besant School , "In 1939, the president of the Theosophical Society invited Dr. Montessori to Mumbai to conduct classes. She ended up staying for many years (war time emergencies didn't permit her to leave), and held very intensive courses. It was under her that the late Tehmina Wadia trained and set up Besant in 1948."

Among 60-year old Besant's famous little patrons have been Zayed Khan, Fardeen Khan, Esha Deol and Vivek Oberoi. Besides that Aamir Khan, Om Puri, Jackie Shroff, Suneil Shetty and Sunny and Bobby Deol are Montessori parents. It's also noteworthy that a municipal school in Bandra, Aseema, has adopted the Montessori method. "It's changed my perspective towards children," explains 25-year-old Kashmir Shah who is taking the training programme at RTI. "They absorb like sponges if given the right environment." With kids handling real quantities to grasp math concepts and movable alphabets for language, even tiny tots can spell 'asparagus', 'flamingo' and 'nocturnal' because they learn words phonetically and therefore spell according to pronunciation. Sounds too complex for the world of a kid? "We don't say 'kids'," admonishes Shah. "Goats have 'kids'. Its 'children'." We stand corrected.

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Mumbai Mirror
8 Feb 2007