

Tribute to Begum

She was the doyenne of ghazals, the soulful voice that sung Ghalib and Khusroo. The other one was her disciple and her protegee. Begum Akhtar and her *shagirda* Rita Ganguly, classical singer, researcher and teacher, have come together in the book *Ae Mohabbat... Reminiscing Begum Akhtar*, a biography of Akhtari Bai written by Ganguly.

The evening of October 11 at the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) was memorable. Organised by Weavers Studio, it was dedicated to the launch of *Ae Mohabbat*, where the author not just regaled the audience with tidbits from Akhtari Bai's life, but also sang some of her celebrated numbers. The evening also saw Aparna Sen reading out bits from the book, portions where Ganguly narrates how Akhtar gets back at her rivals in her profession and holds her own.

Ae Mohabbat, a 350-page volume replete with black-and-white photographs of Ganguly's Ammi: of her performing, smoking, with stalwarts like Bade Ghulam Ali, Rai Chand Boral, Ustad Amir Khan, with her husband Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi, receiving the Padma Shri.

The book comes from another era, an era that started with the fading royalties of Awadh, of *twaiifs* and courtesans and the increasing intensity of the freedom movement and culminated into the post-Independence years of euphoria, enthusiasm, dreams and finally, sobriety.

From her childhood, when she lost her sister, through a traumatic teenage when she was physically abused, to a marriage that put her in purdah, albeit out of her own choice, and later her insurrection, Akhtar was gripped by constant melancholia. "*Ya Allah, ab kya hoga?*" was her constant refrain through her life that made her pour her heart and soul into couplets like "*Mere Humnafas, Mere Humnawa, Mujhe Dost Ban ke Daga Na De, ..., Mujhe Zindagi ki Dua Na De*".



Author Rita Ganguly (right) with filmmaker Aparna Sen at the book launch. Picture Aranya Sen

