



VIGNETTES FROM CHILDHOOD

MAHASWETA DEVI REMEMBERS RABINDRANATH TAGORE

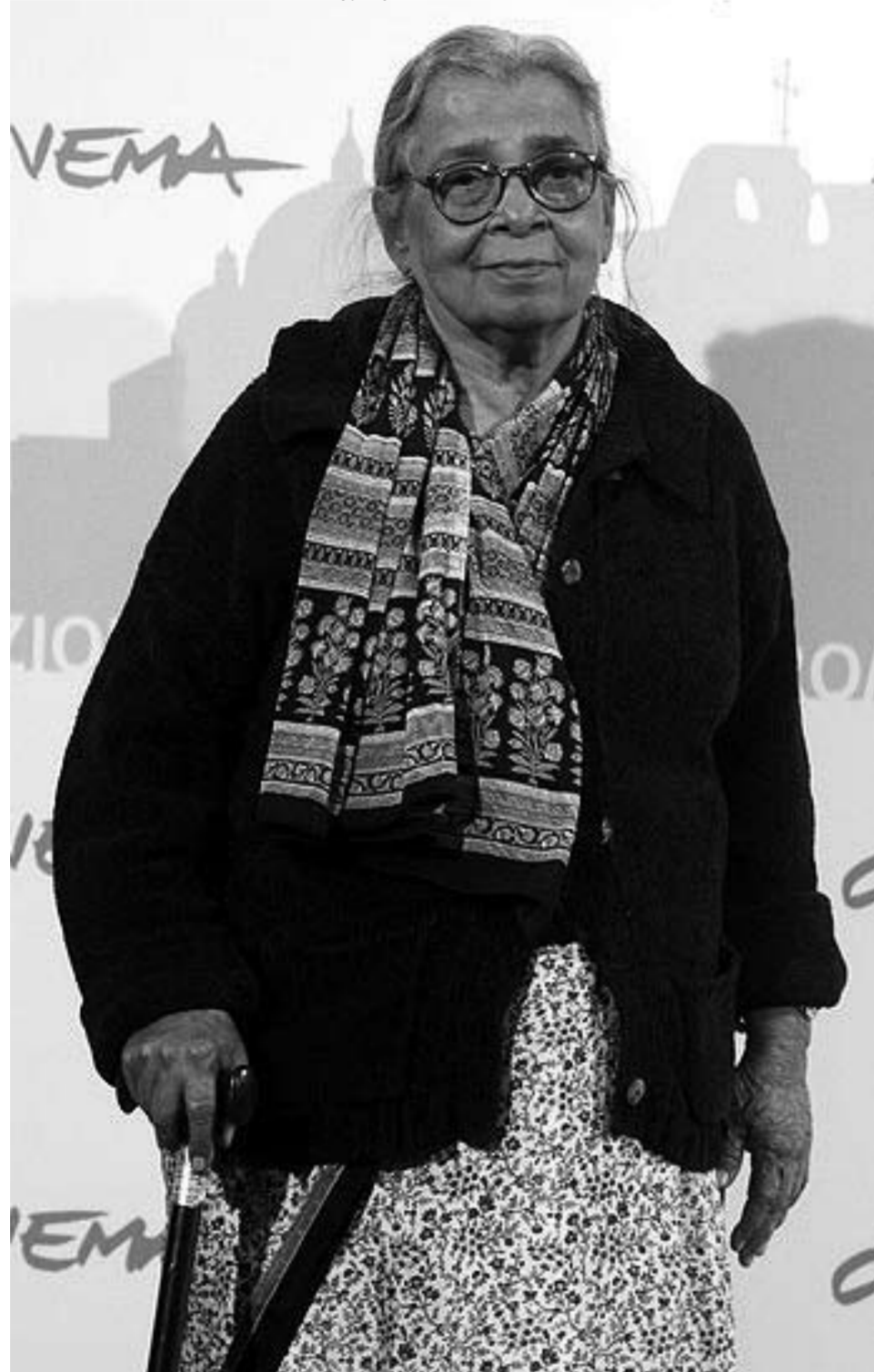
The majestic colonnades of the new Senate Building of the University of Dhaka led an international group of Tagore scholars to a conference intriguingly titled “Contemporarising Tagore and the World”. Was this aimed at finding Tagore’s relevance today or was it encouraging a re-opening of Tagore’s oeuvre to bring out neglected dimensions? The conference held from April 29 to May 1, 2011, offered multiple understandings and much more, showing Tagore studies to be an engaging, current and complex discipline. An outstanding programme was organised as a collaboration between Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan (West Bengal), the University of Dhaka (International Relations Department), Bangladesh, and Jamia Millia Islamia (Academy of Third World Studies), New Delhi. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations of the Govt of India supported the academic event and also the evening’s cultural shows and a rare art exhibition.

At the inaugural session, as we settled into the deep chairs of an impressive auditorium, a side door opened to admit the sparse figure of the chief guest, the eminent, firebrand writer **Mahasweta Devi**. Now eighty five years old and somewhat frail, she seemed a trifle bewildered by the stately environment, even a little bemused that Gurudev should be remembered amidst the whirl of air conditioners and the glare of halogen lights. However, gaining her composure quickly on the dais, she delivered her ‘address’, a mesmerising thirty minutes of rarely recorded memories of her association with **Rabindranath**. Bridging the past and the present, social activism and purposeful literature, regional writing and internationalism, she returned to her formative years. She became, quite touchingly, the child of ten who had found her way to Pathha Bhavan, Shantiniketan, in 1936 when Gurudev was a towering presence, almost like a Magus. Those three years (1936-1939) were magical for her. The children wandered through the forest identifying the *shaal* and *sheuli* trees, sucking nectar from the tender cups of the *kadamba* flower. They were not ‘disciplined’ by external rules but taught by the example of their mentors, both strict and lenient. So if Sarojini di, the housekeeper, had a stern eye, one could escape to the garden plots or run off to watch

the enchanting dancers--Nivedita, Jamuna and Nandini—practising. She recounted an apocryphal tale: one day Mahasweta chanced upon the great Rabindranath himself. Peering up at

laughed indulgently. Such *swadhinata* or freedom of expression remained the valuable legacy of Shantiniketan as Mahasweta Devi grew up.

The other lesson she recalled was



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him, she said, “*Toomi aar likho na—ami aar porte parbo na.*” (“Please don’t write any more—I won’t be able to read so much!”). Fortunately the bard did not heed the ‘advice’ but

learning to combine work with the experience of living (“*jeebaner sange kaaj ke miliye newa*”). Mahasweta Devi observed this in the emerging institutions of Shantiniketan: Nandalal

Bose teaching at Kala Bhavan, story telling sessions at Chatim Tala, or Kshiti Mohan Sen offering prayers at the Mandir on Wednesdays. The little children at the dormitory felt they were part of a large and diverse family; queuing up for meals or attending classes under a tree were part of an expected routine. Pleasurable interruptions in the school year came from the *melas* based on the seasons, Mahasweta’s favourite being the *Poush Mela* in December. She remembered the village artisans bringing terracotta, *dokra* metal work, kitchen implements and wooden toys heaped on their bullock carts. She had a spending allowance of 8 annas, or at most a rupee—“plenty to have fun with” in those days. “You can’t imagine how it was when *He* (Tagore) was alive,” she said wistfully.

In later years, Mahasweta went back to attend College in Shantiniketan and took a degree in English. Gurudev was no more, and a system of education had overlaid the spontaneity. However his innovations had charted a perpetual track of change, especially for the women, said Mahasweta Devi. Co-education was a new concept, environmental issues were discussed and secularism scored over conventional religion. Most importantly, eclecticism in literature, painting, dance, music and theatre was encouraged.

The roots of her writing and her activism were in those formative years inspired by Tagore, she said. From childhood to adulthood to the waning years, the image of Rabindranath listening to each word of a rehearsal, or sitting meditatively by a window, or tapping his fingers to the lines of poetry remained perennial. “*Tomra ki boojhte parbe sei somae tiri!* Will you ever understand those years?”, she asked, almost whispering to herself. We realised that she was Tagore’s ‘contemporary’ in a sense, and they were, both, our agents for rethinking modernity. Born in Dhaka in 1926 of parents who were keen litterateurs, Mahasweta Devi had returned so many years later to complete a cycle of learning. **C**

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MUMBAI EXPRESSIONS
ANJU MAKHIJA

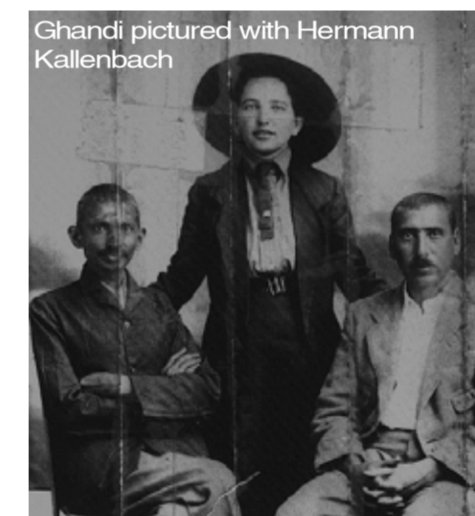
This summer has been dominated by Gandhians, such as Anna Hazare and Medha Patkar, who have emerged as the new icons. Millions of people in the country celebrated when the government gave in to Hazare over the *Jan Lok Bill* that essentially deals with corruption rampant in the Indian society at all levels. Patkar, too, has been on an indefinite fast over one issue or other. The ‘young’ generation has once again identified with Gandhi and his non-violent ways. Now, yoga guru, **Baba Ramdev**, has decided to go on a fast till his demands are met. The government will probably have to give in again as Ramdev has a huge following in both urban and rural areas. The scenario has become almost absurd!

This has also meant that Gandhian activity, which is usually alive in some way or another in India, has seen an upsurge. Gandhi’s books have always been popular as have films centered around his life. I still have my copy of *My Experiments with Truth*, a paperback purchased many years ago which continues to inspire. But not all that is written about the great man is positive. Plays like *Gandhi vs. Gandhi* revealed his strained relationship with his son and family members. A recent publication that has been in the news here is Joseph Lelyveld’s *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India*. It shows us, once again, that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s life is fascinating at many levels, defying any ground rules. Lelyveld’s premise is that Gandhi associates self-control with the achievement of social aims. Any letting up in his sense of discipline is responsible for evil. This biography is a full account of how Gandhi came to be this way.

The book has become controversial and some of it surrounds Lelyveld’s discussion of Gandhi’s sexuality and his close relationship

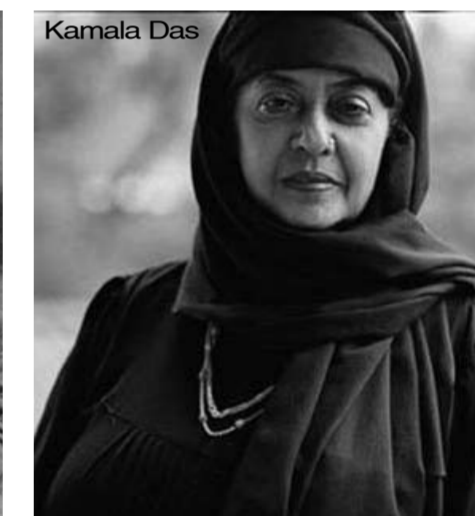
with German-Jewish bodybuilder and architect Hermann Kallenbach. *The Asia Society*, which is very active in Mumbai, organized a discussion and there were suggestions for banning the book. In an email statement Lelyveld responded: I aim to be provocative, not offensive. The story I tell has always been there, just below the surface. From my standpoint, his

Gandhi had promised his mother he would avoid physical contact with women before he left for the UK to study law. But that didn’t prevent him from maintaining close friendships with them and as the book reveals these associations helped shape his ideas on feminism. From disciples like Mira to critics like Annie Besant and Sonja Schelsin, the book explores



failures are in some ways more noble and inspiring than his successes...I can refer you to what Gandhi did say in 1915, a few months after he finally came home from South Africa. In a letter to his dear friend Kallenbach, he wrote, ‘I see around me on the surface nothing but hypocrisy, humbug and degradation and yet underneath it I trace a divinity I missed (in South Africa) as elsewhere. This is my India. It may be my blind love or ignorance or a picture of my own imagination. Anyway it gives me peace and happiness. It fills me with hope and confidence without which no man could work.’

Another publication, *Going Native* by Thomas Weber (*Roli Books*) has also been gaining attention. It is about Gandhi’s relationship with western women—those who inspired and helped him, as well as those who criticized his work. Again, there is some focus on sexuality. It appears that



the relationship between Gandhi and his female colleagues. Through letters and interactions, Weber tries to bring out the Gandhi’s ideas on feminism, womanhood, contraception and celibacy.

Another biography that highlights very personal experiences is based on Kamala Das. *The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir Of A Friendship With Kamala Das* by Merrily Weisbord began as a book that the two women would co-author but ultimately was written by Weisbord. This literary biography offers insight into Kamala’s life as writer and poet, and her unusual relationship with a gay husband, whom she married as a 15-year old. The marriage lasted 43 years, until Madhava Das’ death. But as Kamala told her biographer: she never was a suffering wife, she continued to live with *joie de vivre!* Some of these years were spent in Mumbai along with fellow poets like Dom Moraes

and Nissim Ezekiel. During this time, she actively encouraged younger poets by holding readings at her residence.

The book details how late in life, Kamala’s internal self was awakened. As is well known, Kamala remained a controversial figure right till the end. She converted to Islam in ‘99, and with that, she was drawn into the public eye again. Among the many comments made was a rather bitter one: ‘May the Lord save Islam from Das!’

In this summer of controversies and high-level Osama drama, *The American Centre* organized a reading by city poets to celebrate poetry month. Thankfully, the theme centered around nature to honour *Earth Day* and ‘political’ poems were kept at bay. From Walt Whitman to more contemporary poets like Audre Lorde and Kay Ryan, the audience was treated to an eclectic selection. I had the privilege of reading a poem about *Flamingos* by Ryan which truly seemed relevant in the summer.

The Tagore Literature Awards conceived by Samsung in collaboration with *Sahitya Akademi* were also given away in the heat of May in Mumbai. Prizes were awarded to writers from eight Indian Languages. These celebrated the 150th Birth Anniversary of Tagore and sparked off the never-ending debate as to whether translations helped Indian writers in regional languages.

S. Ramakrishnan, who won the award for *Yaamam* (Tamil), lamented the situation: ‘Lack of good translators means that regional writers are constrained.’ He added, ‘Do you think Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s magical realism would have reached global audiences if it were not for the brilliant translation?’ Said Chander Bhan Khayal who received the award for *Subah-e-Mashriq ki Azan* (Urdu): ‘Once it was banished as an official language by narrow communal concerns. This is a symbol of India’s composite culture and to reduce it into a tool to divide people on the basis of religion hurts deeply.’

So, despite the rising temperatures, it’s been an active summer in Mumbai. A new book store, *Kitaab Khanna*, has also opened up in the busy Fort downtown area and it has been organizing a host of events. **C** Anju Makhija is a poet, playwright and translator based in Mumbai. She has co-edited, *Freedom & Fissures*, an anthology of partition poetry. Makhija has been on the English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi. anjumakhija@hotmail.com