Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

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Uttam Kumar: Beyond Generic Masculinity

Uttam Kumar's place in the Bengali cinema makes us revisit the idea of what may be a cinematic man. He has been celebrated as the ideal romantic hero and as the Mahanayak, the ideal Bengali gentleman and the bhadralok. But such discourses do not unanimously justify the extraordinary star personality that Uttam Kumar becomes. Precisely it is his indeterminable masculinity that makes him important. His cinematic presence, it cannot be denied, was of a man, but it did not replicate masculinity nor did it challenge it – it was a negotiation between the dominant and the fragile, between the master and the spectacle; the term as much as the idea of generic masculinity needs to be interrogated here. Dominant cinematic masculinity has conveniently located masculinity in certain quickly recognizable attributes: strength, decisiveness and independence, heterosexual self-assurance and control, the ability to resolve conflict through action. The male hero often brands his masculinity by fighting, defending, possessing, conquering or saving others.

He often does not manifest his masculinity through violence; he is more sophisticated, more elegant, more emotional and sensitive, more culturally polished, able to inhabit the intimacy of the relationship. He does not eradicate masculinity, he makes it different. This is inextricable from the cultural trope of the bhadralok, the banyan - clad metropolitan 'gentleman' as conceptualised by scholars studded with star persona. Uttam Kumar became one of the

most compelling examples of this 'bhadralok', 'bhalo chele', a nothern order of an educated and culturally refined Bengali male identity, manifest in film; the scholar studying his star image has located his first generation of stardom within this history of masculinity's formation in social and political change. His masculinity is necessarily intertwined with and mediated by class and cultural capital; he is a man whose sedative power is sourced predominantly from a concentration of education, manners, appearance, speech and social legitimacy. However, this gentle approach should not be confused with powerlessness. Male elegance is more accurately regarded as an attenuated form of domination. The gentleman does not need to project his domination with every step he takes, because his cultural standing makes it inevitable.

His restraint functions as the proof of ego control. His physiological vulnerability functions as the marker of erudition. Therefore, what seems to be like a substitute for hegemonic masculinity can actually be its modification of the regional middleclass culture. This paradox renders Uttam Kumar fascinatingly complex. He is not like other of his macho hero counterparts, nor is he less-than strictly a patriarchal other. His screen presence is somewhere in-between. For example, he can be protective without being authoritarian, sensual without being predatory, sensitive without being emasculated.

His masculinity is enacted in the context of other social lives – women, family, friends, and through the presence of his emotional interior.

This connectivity also challenges conventional spectatorship, where the male hero of popular cinema is the subject of the gaze, with the female object. Uttam Kumar turns that upside down – as his body also becomes something for the spectator to gaze and desire. His face, voice, posture, dress and gestures are constantly showcased, and emotionally charged. Smita Banerjee's analysis of his early star persona would be particularly pertinent to this discussion, in that she describes how a physically attractive and emotionally fragile male presence was constructed as a sight for an affective, and desiring gaze (*Essays such as 'Making of Uttam Kumar: The Star, The True Bhadralok.')*. This flies in the face of the expectation that masculinity can only be convincingly conveyed through masculinity – both muscular and in action. Kumar's body is conveyed through stillness – upright posture, carefully calibrated gesture and expressive face give him a masculine quality that is both active and receptive. Moinak Biswas, the scholar of Bengali cinema, describes the generosity of Uttam Kumar's body in some works of his cinematic body as opposed to the uprightness of posture that is also associated with high moral and cultural imperatives. The body thus becomes a site of contradiction – delicate without being feminized, attractive without being hyper masculine, vulnerable without losing command. This is where the idea of star persona is important. Star studies helps us out here. Richard Dyer's conceptualization of the star as a cultural text allows us to see Uttam Kumar not only as a performer of various roles but as far more than that (as introduced and develop in his

foundational book – 'Stars', 1979, https://litlab.stanford.edu/star-texts/)

His on-screen image, interviews, publicity, the nature of his romantic encounters, manner of acting and much of his text history on screen made up a particular persona that drew recognition from one film to the next. This star persona allowed audiences to understand a star's performance in terms of an existing cultural mythology. The star did not approach each film as an empty vessel onto which a performance would be inscribed; the star already became a cultural text whose performance is read in the context of what had gone before. In other words, 'Uttam Kumar' was already an elaborated text whose gestures could be read as a pre-existing code because the reader also read the cultural text as a whole.

This makes his masculinity theatrically intriguing. The masculinity of the male star is not just something they have; it is constructed again and again through their body language, their dress, speech, movement, emotive response and social interactions. The performance of Uttam Kumar reveals this construction. His masculinity just seems natural; so skillfully does he perform his screen behaviour, though spontaneity is part of the star's art. Emotion, then, becomes of particular significance. Standard masculine codes tend to tie masculinity to emotional restraint. What Uttam Kumar does however is to give emotional vulnerability a masculine face.

What is crucial here is that the expression of vulnerability isn't always melodramatic outbursts. It could come through silence, pause, a difference in looks and a softening of voice. The emotion is made visible through restraint.

But upon critical reading we need to be careful to resist the temptation to celebrate this as progressive sensitivity. Emotional vulnerability does not necessarily mean deconstruction of patriarchy. The male character can be the moral centre of the narrative and be hurt. The sensitive man can still be more upwardly mobile, powerful and narratively privileged than the women around him.

Uttam Kumar's manliness embodies an ideological paradox. Patriarchal masculinity can incorporate vulnerability without relinquishing privilege. In fact, his bhadralok-ness adds to the confusion. Culture itself can be an ideal tool to justify masculine hegemony. A gentleman's superiority is legitimated in the society by how he exercises his masculinity through 'politeness' as opposed to 'roughness'- the presentation of gentleman's restraint in front of showing (external and internal) dominance is an acceptance of his primacy. In this respect, Uttam Kumar's masculinity is not post patriarchal; it is an urbane negotiation with patriarchy.

All this is resonant with what was happening in Bengal society. In her detailed study of his

1970s star persona, Smita Banerjee traces the evolution of a 'disillusioned Bhadralok Mahanayak' and correlates his masculinity with the political and social upheavals of that decade. The absolute gentleman is now increasingly confronted by a social universe in which inherited authorities are declining. The masculine subject is no longer unassailable. This shift is also apparent in the changing connection between masculinity and age. The traditional male stardom is usually on the young; their allure and charm (power and status). The later-day cult of Uttam Kumar indicates that another way is also possible. The male sexiness can also be linked with disillusionment, domestic displacement and social insecurity.

Mahanayak, as Bengal knows him, was never the hero his title implies. It is a film of hesitations, of shyness, and of tenderness. In the early scenes of Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (1966), a movie star awakens from a dream in which he drowns in money while the hand of a corpse reaches out for him. Uttam Kumar is one of Bengal's great matinee idols but a fearful man who can't sleep at night. This image sums up more of Uttam Kumar than any biography possibly could because it encapsulates the contradiction that lies at the heart of his career. He became the most adored male face in Bengali cinema by making people believe that the face was uncertain of itself.

Anyone trying to use the word "hero" to describe Uttam is bound to get it wrong. What they have in mind is a Bengali Clark Gable: handsome and easygoing. It will hold water only if you avoid watching his movies. Uttam was neither the tortured self-laceration of Dilip Kumar nor the arrogance that Bombay had started to learn to sell. What he brought to the screen was something else entirely: the masculine figure that listens, apologizes, hesitates, does things wrong and fears making the mistake again. This essay traces this through some of his most important films.

In the standard telling of his story, those first years are omitted. Born in the northern parts of Calcutta as Arun Kumar Chattopadhyay in 1926, he worked in the Port Commissioners' Office as an officer and also acted. His early films were failures. The first, *Drishtidaan* (1948), failed to take off, and for many years afterwards the film industry was known to say that his presence was a sure sign of a flop – a reputation he retained for a long time. It mattered that he had experienced such failures. The actor that became a star in the 1950s knew what it felt like to be inadequate.

The turning point was *Basu Paribar* (1952) and, above all, *Sharey Chuattar* (1953), where he appeared opposite Suchitra Sen. The two stars formed one of the greatest partnerships in Indian cinema, but there is something to say about precisely how it worked. It was not the old pattern of a macho man and an adoring woman. Suchitra Ray was tough, composed and at times even more emotionally articulate than him. In contrast, Uttam learned to become the man who is being analyzed, who waits for the woman's choice and gets moved by the woman rather than moves himself. While the movies usually had its male leads charge into the frame, he would remain still and let the frame approach him.

It was also a specific historical period. During the fifties in Calcutta, one could meet many homeless families and unemployed

young men as well as fears left behind from the time of Partition. Bengali middle-class men, the bhadraloks, could no longer feel safe about the world of their fathers. The screen persona of Uttam embodied this uncertainty and made it attractive. The young men created by Uttam are educated, underemployed, delicate and latecomers to their life. They are not conquerors; they survived; and they happened to be beautiful.

Two movies from this early peak demonstrate how far he would go against expectations. *Harano Sur* (1957), an amnesia melodrama along the lines of *Random Harvest*, sees its hero losing even the fact of his own life. The hero forgets his marriage, past, and the woman he loves. In this melodramatic form, the male amnesiac normally emerges as an enigmatic being, but here, Uttam acts as the unfinished man who depends upon his woman to sing him into his identity. It is hard to find any hero from that age who would play such a helpless role and make it so attractive.

What is remarkable about *Saptapadi* (1961), the film by Ajoy Kar, is not merely the fact that a Hindu Krishnendu is pitted against a Christian Rina Brown and how social pressure from both communities closes in on the lovers. It is the point at which the film places its failure. Not just the family, not just the religion, but Krishnendu himself fails to have the courage to stand his ground, which Uttam portrays without minimizing that courage. In his case, he drinks, he drifts, he lets things happen to him. This film raises the question of whether love is enough when the man has no courage, and it does not flatter him by giving him a simplistic response. Today, one can understand how revolutionary it was for a star of his calibre to show such vulnerability.

The obvious peak is *Nayak*, but its interpretation is usually misunderstood. It is not a satire of a movie star in a usual way, and neither it is an exposure of a fraud. Ray based this film on a meeting between Arindam and Aditi, a young journalist (played by Sharmila Tagore in a sceptical manner that did not let the star win her over). During their journey by train, she brings out his past and what she finds is a very self-doubting man. In particular, he remembers his mentor during his acting days and how he betrayed his principles. He remembers a drunken episode in his past that will ruin him and how people think that there is something about him that does not exist in real life. He drinks, he drifts, he lets things happen to him. The film asks whether love is enough when the man is not brave and it does not flatter him with an easy answer. Watching it now one sees how radical it was for a star of his standing to expose that failure so plainly.

Ray wrote the part with Uttam in mind and the collaboration works because the actor did not protect himself. Arindam's vanity is real, but so is his shame and Uttam lets us watch the two collide in a single shot. The confession scenes are extraordinary for their restraint. He does not weep or shout. He

lowers his voice, glances away, tries a joke that does not land. It is a portrait of a man performing confidence for so long that he has forgotten where it ends and he begins. Furthermore, the film turns the typical direction of the gaze on its head. Aditi stares, Arindam is stared at. He is the subject of the gaze, and he submits to it. It's this same film about the very society which created him that makes *Nayak* so strangely powerful. The Mahanayak, as he became known in Bengal, was a great hero who was unravelling and it only made him more beloved.

In the following year, Ray brought him in a very different tenor of story, as Byomkesh Bakshi in *Chiriyakhana* (1967). The stereotype of the detective, in any case, is that he is the man who knows. Ray's Bakshi knows less than appears at first glance, and a great deal of the film is about learning to listen. Uttam plays the detective as one who receives information, considers, and leaves the rest to the silence in which to question. It is one of the restrained performances he has given, and consequently one of the most educative: there his sensuousness was rooted in the body, here it is the mind.

There was also *Antony Firingee* that same year, where he was the Portuguese-descended folk poet who had been converted to Bengali and was a celebrated figure of the Bengali kabigan tradition. It was a part that required him to inhabit a certain cultural in-between-ness: a European name and a Bengali voice, a foreigner who was (somehow) accepted by popular imagination. That he was recognised at the National Film Awards, in the very first year the Best Actor award was to be handed out, jointly for this and *Chiriyakhana*, feels right. Both roles require an actor to step back into the periscope of attentiveness and cultural translation. Comedy, and the courage to be ridiculous

But there is one side of him that even the most serious criticism would do well to ignore, because it is such fun. Uttam was a terrific comic actor, and it is worth taking the comedies just as seriously as the melodramas. In *Bhranti Bilas* (1963), an adaptation of Vidyasagar's narration of The Comedy of Errors, he finds himself in a series of identity confusions and plunges into the physical gags with the abandon of a star not so deep into images. In *Jhinder Bandi* (1961), a Zenda-ed swashbuckler, he plays a double role and shows us how wickedly playful he could be.

It's related to the very same impulse that makes him so eager to look weak. When a performer demands dignity at all times, there's only one kind of man he can possibly be. Uttam loosened his mask. He could be pompous and important in one scene and knocked out the next, and viewers believed because he didn't seem to take a fixed self as final.

Shankar's *Chowringhee* (1968), based on the well-known novel, he had one of his most delicious late-sixties parts. As Satyasundar Bose, a has-been barrister, now working in a Calcutta hotel, he emanates the

slow exhaustion of a class that has no foothold. The hotel is a place of frills, and Bose its most affected occupant- Uttam plays him with understatement – with a stillness that conceals a well of pain. Once again the star's own public esteem functions as a surface, and the role calls for what lies beneath.

So, by the mid-seventies, the range of the career was staggering. It was a man who could can the mass-market melodramas of *Amanush* (1974) (directed by Shakti Samanta in Hindi and Bengali alike), where he is caught in the heat of the times and gradually comes through. Even in this proto-actionman film, what remains are the residue-the defeated person's body language and the battered civility of his dialogue tap into the older Uttam more than an action-hero template.

To get a sense of Uttam's corporeality, imagine how he employed his body: he's not a physically imposing actor, and he doesn't establish his authority solely through intimidation. His hands do a lot of work: they are constantly fiddling and trembling; they reach out and recede. His eyes are generally fixated away from direct confrontation, and they lend the other person a sort of assessing warmth. His gait is leisurely; when he raises his voice, it's more often an expression of a loss of control than a demonstration of dominancy. All this summed up to a quiet debate about what a man could be in public. In the 50s and 60s Indian cinema was hoarding its cache of masculine characters: the noble son, the one-sided lover, eventually the rebel, the outsider. Uttam was slightly to one side of all of them.

One might be tempted to label it proto-feminist masculinity-yet that label would be wrong. Uttam's films were never editorialized. What he delivered instead was more subtle: emotional exposure as a demonstration of power, a feat he pulled off by wielding the prestige of a star who could have taken his devotees anywhere. That star power combined with castigation is what makes his work radical in the context of commercial cinema.

He died unexpectedly in July 1980, at the age of fifty-three, as he was making a film, *Ogo Bodhu Shundori*. The loss felt in Calcutta was so profound that Mahanayak, a fantasy title coined by an adoring admirer, took on the character of an epitaph. It was wrong, something was lost in that.

The films that came after him have generated their own handful of good-looking stars and even some more technically brave ones. But not many have come close to him when it comes to dealing with uncertainty. As he appears to us now, in an age when the image of masculinity on the screen is up for grabs, he is startlingly modern. He looks like a man a neighbour can look at, and not be threatened; a man who can lose the argument without losing his composure, and knows that a man's greatest strength may lie in his self-control.

Uttam Kumar knew, longer before most of his colleagues, that the audience does not love certainty. It falls in love with the time that a once mighty face turns terrified.

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