Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

Pradip Biswas

Uttam Kumar: Larger Than Life Actor

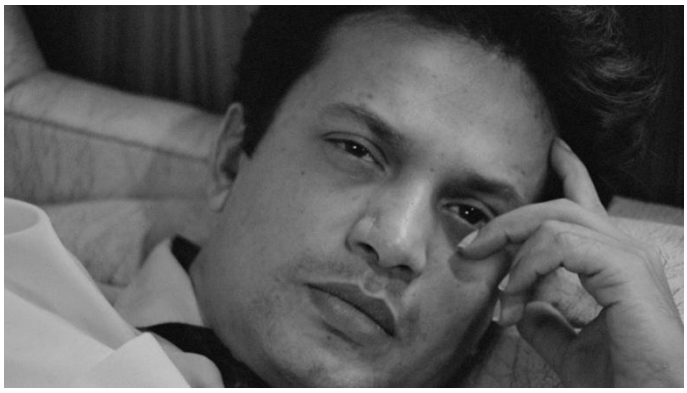
Uttam Kumar, born Arun Kumar Chattopadhyay, is celebrated as the undisputed Mahanayak (Great Hero) of Bengali cinema. Incidentally, I have seen almost all of his films that truly counted in the sands of time. Uttam Kumar as an actor did not get time to count numbers of films released in big theatres of Calcutta and suburbs etc. He was born in 3rd September, 1926 His best time as international icon came from Berlin where he was adjudged as the best actor in the Berlin Film Festival. Apart from this he won National Award being adjudged as the best actor as *Antony Firingi* a Bengali film.

It is indeed puzzling to say the least that just the mention of the name "Uttam Kumar" sends a Bengali, above the age 45 or so, into a reverie, accompanied by a happy distant smile. He or she does not want any more of any comparison, but just to stay immersed in the happy memory of the idol who continued to rule Bengali cinema even 40 years after his death, and probably 65 years after his first successful movie release date. And a Bengali laments of his death at 53 years of age because Uttam was still acting at a high level, largely in comedy roles, and delivering entertaining movies. *Nayak* is a testament to Satyajit Ray's remarkable range as an *auteur* par excellence.

As a brooding character study, *Nayak* is distinctively different from Ray's early ubiquitously renowned works like *Pather Panchali* (1955) and *Mahanagar* (1963) which are essentially dramas laden with social commentaries. The social commentary in *Nayak*, on the other hand, is mostly implicit. However, the one Ray movie that *Nayak* does hark back to is the 1958 musical masterpiece, starring the great Chhabi Biswas, *Jalsaghar* —undoubtedly, one of the greatest character studies of all time. *Nayak* serves as a great precursor to Ray's Calcutta Trilogy comprising *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971), and *Jana Aranya* (1976).

What is the reason for such charm, such involvement of two-three generations, educated or illiterates, Hindu or Muslim or Sikh, so long a Bengali? How do you understand this phenomenon? What are indeed the reasons Satyajit Ray said: "First impressions were certainly good. Uttam had good looks, a certain presence; an ease of manner and no trace of the theatre in his performance. He obviously had a future."

I found it very hard, puzzling to answer these questions. I read some of the literature (some well-written), saw his biographical documentaries (not well-done). but then nothing would probably satisfy a fan, except attribute certain super-natural attributes. Actually, a book should have been written by a co-actor, but except offering a few comments in interviews, there is hardly anything written by them. Notable exception is the biography by Supriya Devi who wrote the interesting biography "My life, my Uttam" ("Amat Jeevan, amar Uttam) which is perhaps the best we have. This book reveals many aspects of the actor's persona, like his sensitivity, his love for certain food, but still from the point of view of a lover, a partner, bound to be biased and sentimental.



What Uttam thinks about acting? About himself? In fact, Satyajit Ray did an enormous service by exploring precisely these aspects. It was indeed the super-genius Satyajit to ask these questions. He realized early that there was a phenomenon that needed exploration. The film *Nayak* is worth seeing many times. It brings out the sensitivity, the affectionate, helpful nature of the hero. For example, the scene where he helped opening the medicine bottle for the young girl was so natural. That probably was Uttam. His initial resistance to Sharmila Tagore's inquisitiveness was also natural. It was also known in bits and pieces that Uttam cared deeply about his success and his super-stardom, known about his profound insecurity about his own performance in a scene, was perpetually asking even juniors: "was the shot okay?".

So much has been written and told about actors like Cary Grant and others. I recently saw a documentary on Robert Mitchum — the documentary touched many aspects of actor's life deftly and with perceptivity. It was probably hard in Calcutta those days to preserve the details.

I did not get to see many movies when I was growing up in the suburb of Calcutta, for various reasons, one of them being that I did not find them too interesting. I did see a few with my friends of Presidency Collège but my detachment continued. I started seeing movies regularly after reaching Brown University, and was even a member of the film society there and later in the University of Chicago, but movies I saw were mostly Bergman, Fellini, Hitchcock, Lelouch, and also a good deal of American Western that I really liked. I also lived with a roommate who was much into movies, at Brown. I did see Bengali and Hindi movies now and then but found them even less interesting than before.

However, from my College days at Presidency, I did remember watching two great Bengali movies — *Jhinder Bandi* and *Khudito Pashan*. The first one featured Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chatterjee in lead roles. This was not only a blockbuster but also wonderful movie with great scenic beauty, great action, romance and above all great performance by Uttam and Soumitra. In those days, I was more impressed by Soumita Chatterjee's acting. In *Khudito Pashan*, there was only Soumitra and again a great acting. So, I was kind of indifferent to the charm and acting by Uttam Kumar and did not understand why everybody was so much taken up by Uttam Kumar.

Many years passed, and also old movies became available in the internet. I was drawn to watching many of the movies, and then old Bengali movies. I began to admire Uttam's role. 'Admire' would be an understatement. I can say I got addicted to, in a similar manner my elder brother and my friends were, almost 50 years ago.

Let us be clear. I was/am seeing movies which were filmed more than fifty years ago, some even nearly seventy years. That is a long time.

And I began to understand and appreciate the star quality not only in Uttam Kumar but also in other actors. And I began to wonder, like many did before me and shall do after me, the undying appeal of Utaam Kumar's acting and persona.

Bengal has this strange phenomenon. Women as admirers almost have found their mates in Uttam Kumar and imagined the legend as their husband; so, this is a phenomenon that when such story reached the actors' ears, he felt to adulated and at the same time sad for such a myth?

He loves to create almost from no where these strangeness that is inexplicable. It is so hard to explain. I found the movie on Rabindranath Tagore so lacking in quality and substance that I was repulsed. Then Satyajit Ray — how do you explain Ray?

The apparent immortality of Uttam Kumar is also hard to explain and poses an enigma. Dr. Gurudas Bhattacharya my teacher at the Scottish Church College said: "UttamKumar has a feature of Greek God, radiating certain glow around him. And his

presence in the screen mirrors his characteristic feats in his performance. This is a wonder to be outright."

Uttam Kumar's ability to make an unbelievable, even impossible, character a believable, loveable one. Take the movie *Stree* (wife). Uttam Kumar acted the role of a wealthy, spoiled small king (actually a landlord) who wanted to stay immersed in music, alcohol and women. The character was absurd. But then why was the movie successful? Please see the movie — he made the character not just believable but loveable. Even now, the character makes you think that this is the way a person should live. The characters he played themselves acquire certain immortality because viewers could associate with the character.

But then we need to ask, how? How did (or, does) this happen? It was no film director's contribution. Uttam had an enormous talent in getting into a character, studied details of possible attributes to make it a "type character" — not a typical character. As Maxim Gorky pointed out in his book for budding writers, always try to create a type character. Uttam knew these instinctively.

A lot has been spoken of his dazzling, mesmerizing smile. It is certainly a gift of God. It has been mentioned by many people, including Soumitra Chatterjee. He always provided space to his co-actors. This he did by seldom over-acting. Take the movie *Rajlakshmi* O *Srikanta.* This movie was pointed out by Rithuporno Ghosh as one of the best acting so far. A comparison may be drawn that the pair of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen had created a spell of awe upon the viewers. The screen pair of Uttam-Suchitra has a chemistry of its own! However, I feel when Suchitra paired with Uttam Kumar, certainly Suchitra Sen used to lift higher than Uttam Kumar due to her charming beauty mixed with magic resonance. However, I must say Uttam Kumaras thespian on the screen had a longer stay and spectacular spell upon the cine-viewers of all kinds.

The example of "grace under pressure" was mentioned by no other than Satyajit Ray in the context of the great film *Nayak*. In that well-known scene when Sharmila Tagore approached Uttam Kumar for an autograph, with a piece of paper, the ink had dried up in his fountain pen. As Satyajit Ray was going to stop filming, Uttam Kumar first shook the pen, and tried to write. Failing, he then dipped the tip in water in a glass in front of him, and finished the autograph, while talking at the same time in normal voice. Even Ray was impressed by the effortless grace and performance by Uttam Kumar. A unique suggestion which carries meaning of cosmic power. The kindness that he displayed. We never knew where it came from except to guess that in his personal life, he was an extremely silent guy. His contemporary actors repeatedly mentioned this.

His lighter films, many in numbers, have a half-life to be frank. He is said to be amazing in comedy scenes. He displayed the grace and humility in all his movies with Suchitra Sen, Supriya, Sabitri and other actresses. Everybody became relaxed when he was around. The film *Rajlakshmi O Srikanta* again had Suchitra and Uttam Kumar: here Uttam Kumar blazed with verb and acumen out-stays ages of solid time and space.

Uttam Kumar did not halted here: he went to produce and direct a Hindi film *Chhotisi Mulakat* that not only flopped but also invited wrath and division. Again, why and how? I can only guess. He had tremendous eye for details, so that the characters he played seemed real. It is said that a genius is distinguished by his/her eye for details and efforts to capture them. I have to mention the kind personality that came out again and again from the screen. In real life he tried to help many. We had a distant relative who was the secretary of Bengal Film Society. When he died, Uttam showed up not just to pay homage but to ask the family if any help was needed.

When thinking of Uttam Kumar, I am always reminded of a late-night interview by Paul Newman. I forgot the name of the interviewer — might have been Mike Wallace or Barbara Streissand. In that interview, Paul Newman was shown clips from many of his famous movies, and asked him to comment. Mr. Newman just characterized his performance as “trying too hard”, “okay” etc. That is, he gave thumb down for those performances where he appeared to trying too hard. This meant that in his opinion, acting should come out smooth and effortless. This is understandable.

In the case of Uttam Kumar, the most of his acting was smooth and appeared completely effortless. One of course should not be fooled by that because in both the cases, huge effort went into making the performance appear effortless and smooth so that characterization becomes believable.

I have a few additional comments to conclude with. First, Uttam did not get the recognition he deserved. The question naturally arises: was he aware of that? I would guess — Yes, he knew the level that he climbed, almost single-handedly without much help, by self-study, perseverance and understanding. The understanding in turn came from his kindness towards all and humility. This is where he scored well above many other actors in the East and the West. Second, his graceful effortless acting came from a deep innate desire to please people. This reminds you of the last lines of Sharmila

Tagore in *Nayak* when she wished him many more years of success in giving happiness to people. Those are of course the words of Satyajit Ray.

Sometime in May 1966, Satyajit Ray called Uttam Kumar. "Uttam, *Nayak* premieres tomorrow at Indira Cinema. I hope you will be there," Ray reportedly said. "But Manikda, the press and public will be in attendance. Do you think I should go? There will be pandemonium," he replied. "Uttam, don't forget it's a Satyajit Ray film. Please be there," Ray commanded. The next day, the news of Kumar's appearance at the cinema house spread and all hell broke loose. By late afternoon, roads leading to Bhowanipore had to be barricaded. Uttam Kumar's car – by most accounts a Chevrolet Impala – was piloted through the by-lanes. The theatre was shaking under the weight of uproarious chanting, '*Guru*, *guru*', with demands to see the star. The hall manager rushed to Ray. "Sir, if we don't bring him up on stage there will be a serious law-and-order issue." Minutes later, the lights came on and Kumar was seen standing on the platform in front of the screen. He raised his hand. The crowd fell silent, as if by the waving of a magic wand. "I request you to please be silent and watch the film. Don't forget it is a Satyajit Ray film."

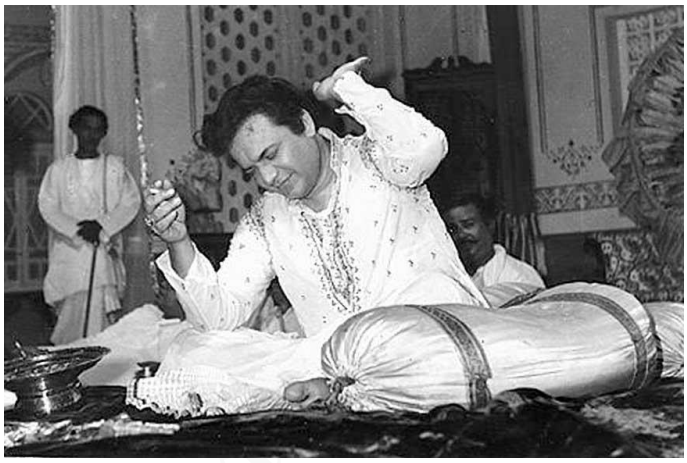
This story, a piquant testimonial to two of Bengal's foremost immortals, is probably apocryphal. But that takes nothing away from what this tale testifies to – from Ray's sway over his cast, the pliant theatre manager and finally the phenomenal stardom of Uttam Kumar. In some ways, this story encapsulates the fantasy that was Bengali cinema. But as is known, it is not Ray who colonised that cinema, either as fantasy or as commerce. It was Uttam Kumar. And only Uttam Kumar.

Born as Arunkumar Chattopadhyay, he made a brittle, obscure acting debut in an unreleased Hindi film called *Mayador* in 1947. In 1948, he appeared in the equally-forgotten *Drishtidan* – it was a Bombay Talkies film – having braved a roomful of cocky, loud naysayers during the days of shooting. He was employed as a clerk at the Port Commissioner's department, a job he juggled with furtive and fervent visits to the studios in suburban Calcutta. The first seven films failed miserably. Behind his back, they called him a 'flop master general', in front of him they reminded him of the pedigree of his predecessors and the audacity of his aspiration. Thinly built and emaciated, with a crop of oiled back brushed hair, thick lips, a fleshy nose and round, curious eyes, Uttam Kumar, they claimed, was lacking not just in *bhadrolok* rearing but also in 'heroic' looks. Uttam Kumar, on his part, was no less clueless. He continued to lap up the roles he got, improved upon his borderline stammering, read voraciously and trained in soccer, swimming, wrestling and music. But his films continued to come a cropper. Till the early 1950s, the dream of being a

phenomenally-popular matinee idol was not remotely in the reckoning and an unprecedented stardom was not even fanciful idea; nor did he imagine that one day he would be Ray's protagonist and walk the red carpet at the Berlin Film Festival.

But the story changed radically with the success of *Basu Poribar* and *Sare Chuattor,* both in 1954*,* the latter having launched his legendary pairing with Suchitra Sen. The same year, a teary, highfaluting melodrama *Agniporikha*, again with Sen, gave him the stellar push. A precocious struggler of about a dozen movies, he became an incomparable movie star. And there is a strong reason for it. Uttam Kumar, instead of being daunted by the inadequacy of his origins, turned it into an asset. Instead of following his peers and predecessors, he used his innocuous ordinariness to subvert the predominant style of high theatricality and brought to the fore a contemporary, idiomatic, natural and effortless style of performance. And that was what was to became his signature. Soon, his apparently average looks became a magnet of affection, his gait of imitation, his manners of romance, his smile of idolatry. Hence sometime in the summer of 1954, a year before Ray's *Panther Panchali* stormed the art movie circuit, a fabled celluloid life premiered around the Tollygunge studios of Calcutta.

The black-and-white romance came to be *art-de rigueur* of Uttam Kumar's stardom. Yet, that genre, instead of being escapades into the fantastic, was deeply rooted in the economies of social and cultural capital, partaking in the massive reconstruction of post-Partition Bengali life and cultural milieu. Moreover, he promoted and represented a self-consciously *crossover* cinema, which was to be found in the neighbourhood of melodrama but subverted its populist trappings and was grounded in a genteel, evolved critique of their contexts.



Uttam Kumar's body of work transcended generic divisions. He could perfectly embody O. E. Klapp's figurations of the romantic hero, the Average — and Good — Joe, the Pin-Up and the unrelenting rebel and all of them, often, in a single role. At the same time, he played the insidious anti-hero is decadent aristocrat (*Stree*), the murderer (*Sesh Onko)*, the player (*Kal Tumi Aleya*), the humbug (*Aparichito*) and the vanquished (*Jodubangsho*). Above all, and what remains his climactic achievement, he played himself in Ray's *Nayak*. It is to the astonishing confidence on his fame that one must attribute his eagerness to perform a cinematic self-critique in this film, unperturbed by the possibility of betting to the future the carefully-constructed mysticality of his extraordinary stardom.

He lived the whole of his cinema-starred, produced, directed, set the score and in one case even did playback singing. Uttam Kumar's popular heft is unmatched either before or after him. Throughout his life, a mad following stalked him, distressed his free

movements and put to interrogation his closely-held middle-class upbringing. His cult has increased incrementally since his death in 1980, managing to include a younger generation of viewers with all their baggage of new cultural tastes.

Uttam Kumar's unsuccessful stint in Hindi cinema should also be noted as a factor of his dominance of Bengali cinema. He was not a Stanislavskian actor but a natural one. His acting was rehearsed, yes, but never choreographed. His keenly-imbibed modernity and effortless felicity made him embody the idiomatic idiosyncrasies of the Bengali diction and language – complete with an unerring sense of poise and movement, gesture and response, animus and reflection. It was impossible to transport the gestural demands of the language fundamental to his performance. It was inevitable that he ended up lending his worst parts to Hindi cinema while the range, depth and subtlety of his acting, the cosmopolitanism of his style and the pursuit of brilliance in tens of Bengali films have remained outside the gregarious celebration of so-called Indian cinema.

In November 1957, the MGM-backed art-deco landmark Metro Cinema in Calcutta made a historic amendment to its English-film-only policy. It decided to screen *Chandranath*, a luminous old-world Bengali melodrama, bowing to the increasingly irrepressible stardom of its young leading artistes – Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Bengali cinema took a giant leap that day, making an exultant entry into the glitter of downtown *Chowringhee.* Interestingly, the chief projectionist of Metro Cinema was a tall, lean, serious-looking man named Satkari Chattopadhyay, who, when he kept his eyes firm on the first reels of *Chandranath* as it unspooled, saw his son's giant image on the white screen he had lighted for years. That day, the father and the son together made history, while Bengali cinema decidedly stepped into the affluent, cosmopolitan climes of its home city. Unknown to most, 1957 also saw the release of Uttam starrer *Pothe Holo Deri*– reportedly the first ever Bengali film to have a part of it shot in colour- Gevacolor. Ray's *Kanchenjungha*, the first Bengali colour film (in Eastmancolour) was still five years into the future.

The year 1957 also marked the release of marquee melodrama *Harano Sur*, a blockbuster romance that received a Certificate of Merit from the Indian government. As co-producer, Uttam Kumar was invited to Delhi to collect the award. As expected, hundreds congregated at Howrah station anticipating a glance at the star. Fearing chaos, Uttam Kumar's car – this time a Studebaker President – was ushered in through the station's exit gate and he was hurriedly huddled into the waiting train. Incidentally, this scene is relived in Ray's *Nayak*, where Kumar's character Arindam Mukherjee is seen travelling to Delhi to collect a prestigious award. It should be noted that in 1967, a year after *Nayak*, the

government of India announced the inaugural Bharat Award for best male lead in Indian cinema–the first award went to Uttam Kumar for Ray's *Chiriyakhana* and Sunil Banerjee's *Antony Firingee*.

"In my heart I know – nothing, not this light, or this radiance – nothing will last. This light might snuff out at any moment and throw me into deeper darkness." Uttam Kumar had written these lines in his book *Amar Ami* before his death. By some strange coincidence, on the day he died in August 24, 1980, the manuscript of *Amar Ami* went missing, only to be recovered much later and published in the form of a book by Saptarshi Prakashan. The actor, who had been documenting his phenomenal personal and professional journey in this book, spoke his heart out about his life as a star, his struggles, his loneliness and much more. Even as I read and re-read these lines, I wondered about the immense loneliness and insecurity that would have gone into such writing, emotions one doesn't really expect from a superstar and much loved man.

During the course of my research for my own book that dwelt on the onscreen relation between Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, I had come across an anecdote that gave me a glimpse into the sheer madness that went into the making of a star like him. Uttam had been invited to speak at a public event. On most such occasions the stage would have to be made at a much higher level than normal, in order to ensure that no one could climb onto the platform suddenly. When it was his turn to speak from the dais, the actor noticed a rather strange sight. A woman seemed to be dangling from the nearby multi-storey building while calling out his name. Alarmed at the sight, the star asked her why she was dangling the way she was, because she might fall down. To this the lady had replied that she was standing on the shoulders of her husband just to catch a glimpse of Uttam Kumar!

The adulation and love that Uttam Kumar had received from his fans (both male and female) remains unparalleled in Bengali cinema till today. There have been stars and actors far more successful than him both commercially and artistically, but this man continues to carve a niche in the hearts of cine goers as one of the most adored film star ever.

How a small-time actor who started with a film like *Mayador* that was not even released went on to become the ultimate hero of Bengali cinema remains a tremendous journey that could inspire many till date. He was influenced by the theatre scene in the 1940s, and continued doing theatre even after he had started acting in films. Uttam was initially awed by the likes of Sishir Kumar Bhadury and Nirmalendu Lahiri, but he soon

became frustrated with the exaggerated methods of dialogue delivery and voice modulations and concentrated on more realistic acting methods. To say that the actor prepared well for his roles would be an understatement. From chanting the Gita and the Chandipath in order to improve his diction to participating in *lathi-khela* (sparring with wooden sticks), wrestling, swimming and even horse riding lessons, Uttam Kumar went the extra mile to become the complete actor. There are many anecdotes recounted by his co-actors about how he would be in a trance while he was in character during a shoot.

As an actor and producer, Uttam saw stupendous success. Awards and recognition came from the highest quarters, both during his lifetime and later. Unfortunately, he became typecast in the lover boy image in most people's minds in spite of the fact that he had been experimenting with different roles from a very early age. *Nayak* (1966), *Chiriyakhana* (1967), *Amanush* (1975), *Ananda Ashram* (1977) and many other such films speak of a versatile actor capable of handling diverse roles given the right script and direction. Satyajit Ray had observed once, "Even in films where the director's calibre was questionable, Uttam tried his best to contribute to the overall success of the film; with the better ones he simply excelled."

But a true assessment of the actor's popularity would reveal that the love people had for him was not only because of his roles but also had much to do with the person he was. There were two distinct sides to Uttam, one the flamboyant Mahanayak (hero) and the other a man whose empathy for those less fortunate stood out every time. It was his eagerness to help the needy that, in fact, earned Uttam the tremendous respect in the industry from producers, directors, senior and junior artistes. As an actor who never forgot his own struggling days, he is said to have always encouraged young, upcoming actors too. Again, perhaps few actors have done as much for the industry and its co-workers as Uttam had during his superstar days. His organisation, Shilpi Sansad, which provided security for retired actors is only one such example.

Personal life of Uttam Kumar was not all sound and happy. First, he separated from his first wife Gouri Devi, when her mother was alive: then he married Supriya Devi out of love and the partnership stayed till the end. But when his Hindi film had flopped, Uttam Kumar forced Supriya Devi to part with her Bank account and the whole account was depleted by Uttam Kumar to pay his huge debt caused by the failure of the film; this started rift between them. When I was the Vice President of the Bengal Film Journalists Association, popularly known as BFJA, phone calls used to come to Bagiswar Jha, the film historian and the President of BFJA, my guide my mentor in film history of the past. Supriya Devi or Benudi as I used to call her

complained that Uttam Kumar had thrashed her. This caused enough tension in us. The event was kept secret from the circulation as it might hurt the sentiments of the quarreling couple. I personally hated this event and digested in pain.

There are few actors in Bengal till date who have been able to generate the kind of mass hysteria that Uttam Kumar did. Strangely, the craze for Uttam is still unflagging, and a staple Bengali entertainment even today is a rerun of his films on television every once in a while. If you're in Calcutta and making your way about in the well-loved yellow taxis towards the South, you might just meet a film loving taxi driver who would point out the statue of the actor or the crumbling studios in which he once worked.

It is believed that Uttam Kumar used to watch night shows those films of Marcello Mastroianni, the ace actor of Italian cinema, to learn art of his acting style. Not one film but as many as possible: in those times very engaging films were released at English theatres like Light House, Metro, Globe etc. This shows his utter passion to learn more of acting styles of Gregory Peck, David Niven, Anthony Quinn, and Anthony Quayle etc.

Throughout his life, Uttam loved people and they loved him back tremendously in return. The passage of time has not dimmed his memories from public memory, and tributes continue to pour in year after year, and yet it is strange that this man died feeling lonely and often lost. Gautam Chatterjee, Uttam Kumar's son, had said, "Every year July 24 comes with a fresh reminder of how much I have lost, of how much the film industry has lost... what a void still remains, with no one to replace him on the silver screen, even after so many years." Uttam Kumar was wrong about the light being snuffed out, though. He remains through his films, fresh as ever.

Pradip Biswas is an Honorary Member of FIPRRSCI-India.