Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

N. Manu Chakravarthy

The Multiple Dimensions of the MAHANAYAK

An unusual phenomenon in Bengali cinema is that the hero, or the 'nayak', achieved a status that often rose higher than that of Bengal's acclaimed directors, respected by discerning critics and cinephiles everywhere. The 'nayak' stands in sharp contrast to the counterparts in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Kannada cinema, where 'high drama' and intense 'action' formed the core of the 'hero'. It was only because of the 'presence' of the male protagonist, and not so much because of the status of the director, that Bengali films had box office success.

Intriguingly, what is interesting is that Bengali film lovers did not throng theatres to watch their superhero bash up villains or engage in romantic sequences around parks and gardens with their rain-drenched female stars, singing songs of romance and love. This unique star culture is best exemplified by Uttam Kumar—reverently known as the 'mahanayak'—and Soumitra Chatterjee, the two towering cult figures of the industry. It is a different matter altogether that a highly refined and polished actor like Dhritiman Chatterjee never scaled the heights of

mainstream popularity that Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chatterjee did.

Ironically, Uttam Kumar held most commercial Bengali cinema in low regard, a sentiment he shared with Satyajit Ray. On multiple occasions, he openly lamented the "Revival and Fall" of Bengali cinema, confessing that very few films ever brought him genuine artistic satisfaction. However, a couple of films were his chosen favourites. Even at the peak of his popularity, Uttam Kumar openly remarked that public expectation crippled his performances, binding him to an image that controlled his creative autonomy. He maintained that he could not act as he wished, guided by his understanding of the character he was portraying, because the pressure of his immense popularity compelled him to stick to his public image. He added that this was why he could not envisage himself playing a villain, as his admirers would reject him.

Reflecting on the state of Bengali Cinema, Uttam Kumar argued that its best phase was between 1954 and 1969, as it drew inspiration from good literature. In contrast, he felt that later cinema deteriorated into stale stories, sentimental and exaggerated emotions, and churned out clichéd fare. In addition, he argued, cinema had lost its sense of the visual idiom and turned out to be more like a “Jatra”, moving toward theatre, becoming excessively theatrical. Bengali cinema, Uttam Kumar explained, had moved far from the vibrant pulse of local life, and, more importantly, had started relying on the artificially crafted personality of a vacuous hero. Through this sharp critique, Uttam Kumar, the much-adored deity of Bengali cinema, in great anguish, dismantled certain hollow structures of his film world, revealing an introspective self that refused to luxuriate in the glory of his stardom. This sharp, serious criticism of the limitations of Bengali cinema was, by implication, an open admission of his helplessness and limitations as an individual dependent on the industry, a startling statement from a megastar who had acted in over 200 films.

Against this background, one must turn to Uttam Kumar the actor and identify the creative elements in the roles he played that made him an authentic performer, going far beyond glamour and fame.

Given the space of this essay, only a few of his films are discussed to foreground Uttam Kumar’s calibre.

Uttam Kumar’s climactic achievement is that he played himself in ‘Nayak’, with astonishing confidence, performing a cinematic self-critique unperturbed by the almost mythical dimensions of his megastardom.

Uttam Kumar is a much-adored star, Arindam Mukherjee, travelling by train to collect a prestigious award—in Satyajit Ray’s ‘Nayak’—when he happens to get into a conversation with Aditi Sengupta, a young editor of a little magazine, and thus begins an inward journey for the former. Ray captures the contradictions between a star with an enormous fan following, thriving on his public image, and the human being filled with regret, remorse and sadness. The film's subtle,

balanced juxtaposition of the inauthentic public image and the genuinely introspective, self-reflexive self opens an inner space that reveals a celebrity's existential angst. Uttam Kumar draws the viewer into a personal realm that the audience, located in social spaces, cannot even imagine exists. It is as if Uttam Kumar, in his portrayal, had become hyper-conscious of the divide between his inner self and the magic of his external being. Metaphysically, the inner voice of a human being struggling to find his authentic self rises above the deafening applause of an admiring crowd that cannot fathom the depths of creative anxiety, bringing to the role an enviable interiority. The movie's empathetic vision comes through when Aditi tears up the notes from her interview with Arindam. This act represents a powerful ethical choice by a journalist not to sensationalise a human being's inner struggle, and it sharply contrasts with the gossip that social media generates about public figures today. Uttam Kumar portrays Arindam's dichotomy of the self with admirable equilibrium and composure.

Uttam Kumar delivers memorable performances in Tapan Sinha's 'Upahar' and 'Jatugriha' that show how the actor understood the fine relationship between creative expression and social reality.

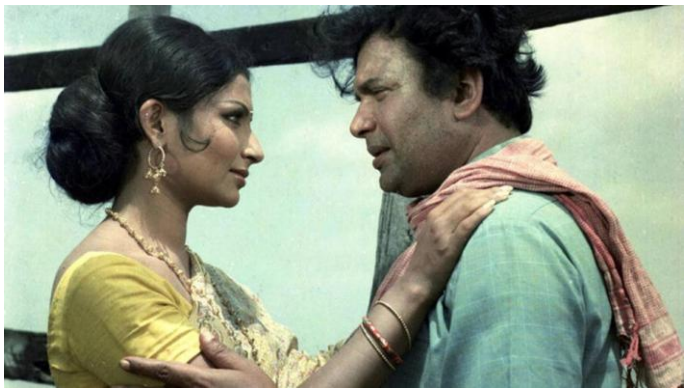
In 'Upahar', Uttam Kumar sheds the flamboyant persona of his movies to blend into a quiet, realistic drama and plays the role of Prof Ashok Sarkar, a considerate, enlightened professor, who, along with his wife Neela, intervenes and acts as a sanctuary for Krishna, the young, neglected daughter of the landlord, who is forced by her oppressive, miserly father to marry for money. However, she is in love with Sunil, who is not wealthy and therefore she cannot get her father's consent. Though Tapan Sinha's movie performed just moderately at the box office, Uttam Kumar's nuanced rendering of Ashok Sarkar was considered remarkably ahead of its time, proving that the actor possessed vast hidden potential that went beyond popular stardom. This initial collaboration between Tapan Sinha and Uttam Kumar is a critique of the feudal, patriarchal social practices that cripple the lives of young girls, and it does so with great restraint and detachment. He is not just playing a single role, not just acting or performing; he is living the character, not just acting it out. He is facilitating the emergence of the new woman, as a professor, as an intellectual; a transformation from a feudal patriarchal order to a democratic set-up.

Uttam Kumar demonstrates his early readiness for minimalist depth rather than purely formulaic or performative stardom and his conviction, primarily as an actor, is that depicting a character demanded full recognition of the evolved nature of the individual he was portraying. By extension, it also meant grasping the film's intellectual and ideological content, without which adequate representation of the character was not possible.

'Jatugriha' features Uttam Kumar as Shatadal, an engineer, who is quite happily married to Madhuri. However, the impossibility of Madhuri bearing children leads to a painful estrangement between the two, for Shatadal is very fond of children but cannot have any because of his wife's condition. The turmoil and anguish of Shatadal find a dignified expression in Uttam Kumar's acting, portraying a deeply vulnerable, ordinary man broken by domestic sorrow, a role that was totally devoid of any unnecessary flourish and redundant rhetoric. Uttam Kumar unfolds this individual agony with consummate ease, avoiding easy melodrama, sentimentality and grand theatrical gestures and relying instead on long, pregnant silences and weary body language to express his inner exhaustion and draw the viewer into the interior spaces of a conflicted human being. By playing an emotionally fragile husband struggling with his wife's infertility, he challenges his own romantic cut-out image. The self-effacing quality the actor imparts to the character has an exquisite aesthetic element that only a refined sensibility can respond to. Uttam Kumar's on-screen dynamic with Arundhati Devi feels raw and painful, capturing the pain of two people who understand each other but cannot bridge their emotional chasm. The portrayal of Shatadal has enduring resonance in Indian cinema for its depiction of urban alienation, angst, and graceful separation.

A reference must be made at least in passing to the biopic 'Antony Firingee', a career- defining National Award-winning movie, which featured Uttam Kumar in a very different role, one that he excelled at, balancing his star charisma with deep emotional vulnerability as Hensman Anthony, a Portugese-origin folk poet who embraced Bengal as his native land.

He shines during the intense 'kobi gaan' sequences and projects the right mix of bravado, wit and wounded dignity while facing vicious social barbs from rival poets. His chemistry with Tanuja anchors the film's tragic element as we find Uttam Kumar transitioning seamlessly from a passionate artist to a devastated husband crushed under social orthodoxy. While the movie itself, as such, leans heavily into melodramatic clichés and has structural issues, it is Uttam Kumar's presence alone that saves the film from being another musical melodrama and elevates it to the position of a cinema classic. There is a certain element of self-awareness in Uttam Kumar's method of acting that kept him from being superficially flamboyant and flashy. In fact, he gave dignity, pride and grace to the characters he portrayed even in films that were contrived and relied on loud sentimentality and unbridled melodrama.



One can see this in the bilingual film 'Amanush', directed by Shakti Samanta, where the director cleverly reworks the tragic hero trope, showing how false imprisonment and malice can turn a benevolent youth into a self-destructive 'amanush' outcast in others' eyes. In the Bengali version, particularly, the narrative delivers greater emotional impact by

relying on Uttam Kumar's acting rather than on the script, maintaining deep audience empathy through the protagonist's palpable vulnerability.

In the Bengali films 'Saptapadi' and 'Shap Mochan', Uttam Kumar delivers powerful multilayered performances, anchoring his legendary on-screen chemistry with Suchitra Sen.

'Shap Mochan', made at the beginning of the 'Suchitra-Uttam' wave, Uttam Kumar embodies the youthful, urban desire to break free of traditional constraints as well as setting an elegant, emotionally restrained template for cinematic romance. Unlike 'Saptapadi', it is less about internal personal tragedy and more about establishing his suave, charismatic screen presence with Suchitra Sen, creating one of the most enchanting on-screen duos of modern, urban Indian cinema.

In 'Saptapadi', Uttam Kumar delivers a demanding character arc, moving from youthful arrogance and heartbreak to religious alienation and, finally, spiritual maturity. His dramatic intensity forms the base for the film's tragic exploration of a cross-faith relationship.

The point is that Uttam Kumar could lend poise and grace to his roles even when the cinematic text surrounding him lacked finesse and elegance.

An interesting contrast is Uttam Kumar's delineation of the eccentric, mysterious sleuth, Saradindu Bandopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi, which differs sharply from the other famous sleuth—the probing, logical, rational, scientific Sherlock Holmes. Satyajit Ray's 'Chiriyakhana' allows the actor to explore new directions and find a new idiom for his expressions. Byomkesh is not the stale, stereotyped typical detective. Uttam Kumar brings a very interesting ludic point of view to Byomkesh Bakshi's character. The playful element lends a distinct comic perspective to mystery and suspense, moving beyond the conventional and worn-out elements of murder mysteries. Uttam Kumar excels in subverting the rigid, static image of a serious, rational, logical detective. It is also to the credit of Satyajit Ray that he was able to draw out this aspect of Uttam Kumar's creativity, which contrasts with their efforts in 'Nayak'.

The portrayal does not depend on exciting emotions or provoking ones. The inwardness of Uttam Kumar mirrors the inward journey of the viewer to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Here, he goes beyond just being a celebrity, does not capitalise on his status, and shows how texturally different he is from other megastars—an actor capable of seamlessly sliding across vastly different costumes and masks.

'Jiban Trishna' has Uttam Kumar playing a sophisticated millionaire and philanderer, Rajnath Samanta, bringing in an

element of self-effacement, defying stereotypes about playboys and stepping away from the romantic-hero mould to portray a wealthy, flawed and complex individual. The 'Suchitra-Uttam' dynamic forms the narrative's emotional foundation. Uttam Kumar balances Rajnath's initial arrogance with a gradual, vulnerable descent into genuine emotional attachment. This elegance defines the creative core of an actor who does not resort to clap-trap methods. The sophistication with which the role is essayed is part of Uttam Kumar's aesthetics and is clearly different from the romantic hero we have been bombarded with in mediocre commercial cinema. The point is that the actor's calibre gives a refined dimension to a film that is heavily melodramatic and sags in the middle.

In 'Bicharak', based on Tarasankar Bandhopadhyaye's eponymous novel, Uttam Kumar imparts a profound metaphysical dimension to the character of the judge, Gyanendra, whom he portrays in the film. There is a Dostoevskian dimension in the dark, negative side of the man who sits in judgment over another human being's sinful deeds, a 'bicharak', a judge. What is striking is the manner in which Uttam Kumar, as the judge, opens up realms of human consciousness, coming to terms with his own dark past. As questions of religion, law, crime, punishment, and truth are grounded, the actor turns deeply inward, essaying a captivating performance that unfolds a deeply anguished, tortured human self that attains a universal dimension, as only great works of art do. By avoiding the superficial method of dramatising the situation that ordinary actors resort to, Uttam Kumar instead turns to the contemplative, meditative mode of underplaying emotions. The dark negative shades of moral ambiguity find their redemption and salvation through deep suffering and repentance. 'Bicharak' is surely one of Uttam Kumar's supremely transcendental performances.

In many other films, Uttam Kumar transcends the limitations of the script and screenplay, enacting his role with admirable, even enviable detachment, creating a fine separation between his evolved aesthetic sensibility and the rather coarse, unrefined aesthetics of popular Indian films. It is to Uttam Kumar's credit as a sophisticated, thinking actor that he recognised this lacuna in the films he was very much a part of and gave expression to it with great sadness and a sense of loss. The 'mahanayak' was deeply aware of the banality of many of his 'nayak' images. For this reason, and because of space constraints, this essay on Uttam Kumar mentions only a few of his films.

N. Manu Chakravarthy is a member of FIPRESCI.