Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

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From Screen to Shrine: The Enduring Aura of Uttam Kumar

Bangalir Mushkil Ashan

"—Damn this public… They are so whimsical. I wish if they could be flattened under the steamroller…"

"—Strange! No public, no market. Then what remains for you to consume?"

Those lines remind us the film *Nayak*. In late 1960s, Satyajit Ray for the first time casted Uttam Kumar in his film. Ray admitted that he had written the script of *Nayak* with Uttam Kumar specifically in mind for the lead role. And while watching the film, one can understand that Arindam, the hero, is in fact Uttam Kumar's alter ego.

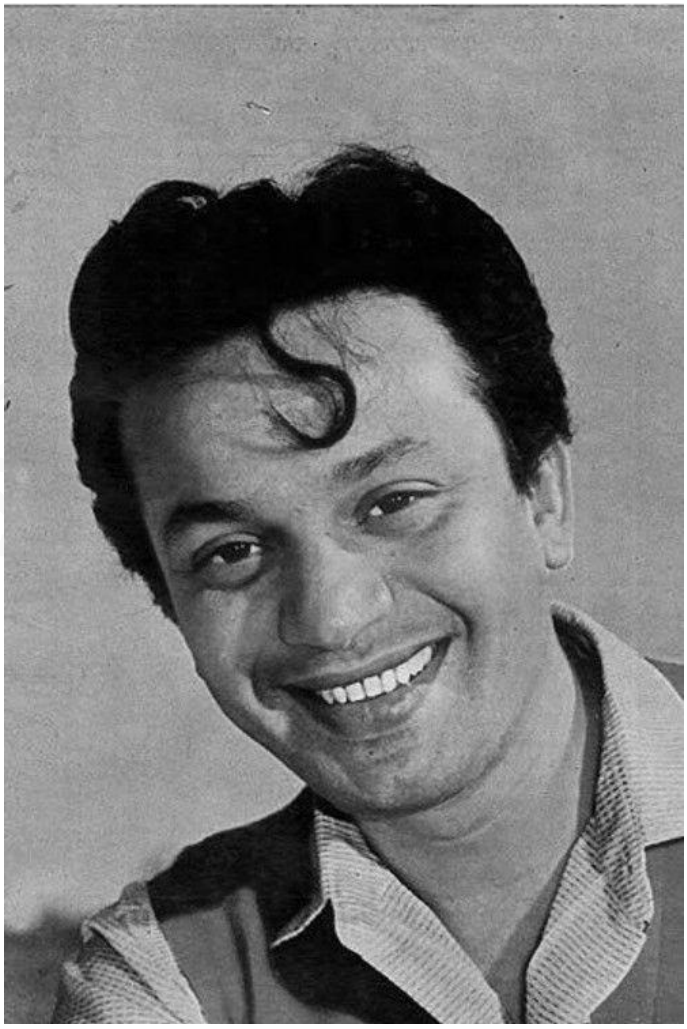
The first of the two lines is Arindam's dialogue—the extremely popular star in the film *Nayak*, while the second line comes from his companion, rather his "satellite,". The two are arguing over whether Arindam's new film will succeed at the box office or not. Uttam Kumar, like Arindam, may well have regarded the viewer as "whimsical". Yet there was no dismissing his companion's rejoinder either- what would one do without the public?

"Public" means the collective mind of the people. And it is this collective consciousness that shapes the tastes and determines the future of mainstream cinema. For three successive decades, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Uttam Kumar remained the undisputed hero of that collective imagination.

Mainstream films, after all, are rooted in contemporary social problems and realities, which constitute an important factor in their popularity among audiences. By relating these social concerns, mainstream cinema transforms lived reality into a "reality" of its own. This manufactured reality, in turn, dominates the popular imagination, often shaping how audiences perceive and understand the social world around them.

In fact, when society is unable to resolve its own contradictions or overcome its reluctance to confront them, it often turns to the popular realm of art and culture to work through dilemmas that remain unresolved in everyday life. Social crises and problems whose solutions appear impossible in reality are symbolically "resolved" within the manufactured reality of mainstream cinema. It is in a similar fantasy of social redress and resolution that Amitabh Bachchan rose to prominence in the Bombay mainstream Hindi cinema of the 1970s as the "angry young man." Subsequently, Rajinikanth acquired immense popularity and came to dominate the cinematic landscape of South India.

Post-Independence Bengali mainstream cinema, too, desperately needed a 'mushkil asan' or trouble shooter—someone who could make difficult things easy or could transform uncertainty into assurance. The Bengalis needed someone as icon, apparently ordinary, apparently identical to them, who would nevertheless emerge victorious at the end, and whose victory would come only after a long drawn struggle. However unrealistically that struggle might be portrayed, it gave the spectator a sense of satisfaction. Uttam Kumar emerged as that figure, the 'mushkil asan' and it continued for nearly three decades.



Even today, when the Bengali middle class watches the films of Uttam Kumar, is it merely an act of nostalgia for the Bengali cinema of a bygone era? Or is it, perhaps, a longing to taste once again the hopes, aspirations, and desires of those difficult and turbulent years? A lost glory that could never truly be recovered and perhaps precisely for

that reason, in film after film, Uttam Kumar had to struggle, fight, and ultimately emerge victorious, fulfilling the desires and dreams of his audience.

He Fought Every Battle Alone

When Uttam Kumar entered the world of Bengali cinema, Bengal was passing through a deeply turbulent period. The 1940s had witnessed the struggle for independence, the devastating famine, communal riots, and the trauma of Partition, while the shock waves of the Second World War had further unsettled the social and political landscape.

Then came the fifties: people homeless, people country-less, coming into cities, flooding the streets, walking unrepentantly, searching for something they knew they had left behind. Again, Bengalis from this part of the country were forced to deal with the harshest of realities that came pouring across the border, destabilizing their lives like a terrifying thought. Amid this came Nehru's assurance of rehabilitation and development: the introduction of five-year plans. Maybe all was not lost after all; a sliver of hope came alive in millions of Bengalis fighting to survive on a land cut in two, seared with blood.

Death had truly 'undone so many' in Bengal, but life rarely stops. Far from their 'homes', far from dignity, Bengali refugees started again. Without institutional recognition, they would forever remain outsiders on this side of the border. They knew they had to regain their identity, fight for prominence, and establish themselves in a new country filled with new people telling the same stories of sadness, all over again. Bengalis, who had been fortunate enough to remain in West Bengal, were not without problems either. They joined their refugee brothers in their fight to survive, to fight for their identity in a new social landscape defined by utmost scarcity and inhuman levels of poverty.

The community's prevailing sense of humiliation and degradation found expression through one name alone: Uttam Kumar. Uttam's onscreen characters across multiple films echoed the redemption of that sense of lost communal pride and identity that had been wrongfully snatched away from them. Uttam Kumar depicted a wide variety of characters on the big screen, such as a responsible elder son in a struggling middle or lower-middle-class family or being the only son of a vastly wealthy businessman. Whatever his character's economic background might have been, the thing that defined his characters was their struggle to gain prominence and establish themselves in prevailing social contexts. Seeking recognition and validation from established social paradigms, both professional and personal, Uttam Kumar's characters struggled and claimed success onscreen, leaving his audience in a blissful state of make-believe vindication.

Any society functions according to an established equilibrium. For this equilibrium to exist, an 'ideal' person has to be curated to

infest the minds of the general populace. This 'ideal' character emerges from all kinds of social prevalence. When a film star becomes hugely popular, they quietly reflect national/communal pride and a certain socio-economic status quo. Within the image/context of a 'star' lies a certain cultural and intellectual backdrop which is firmly held together by the prevailing social fabric. Across his array of films, Uttam Kumar is always seen reclaiming/recovering something: lost love, lost identity, lost familial ties, lost ancestral wealth and property, lost morality. This act of constant reclamation made him so dear to people from across the border, fighting to re-establish their identity and pride on an alien land, always torn between the present and the memory of what they had irretrievably lost. Simultaneously, people from this side of the border felt similarly exhilarated witnessing Uttam Kumar on the big screen, for they found in him an ability to take them back to their 'golden age' of prosperity. It was magic, a kaleidoscope of illusions that kept an entire community going despite facing unspeakable tragedies in the newly independent country.

In the fifties and sixties, the contemporary Bengali imagination was completely engrossed in the reality constructed by films like *Basu Paribar, Agniparikkha, Saapmochan, ShobarUpore, Silpi, Harano Sur, Suryatoran, Suno Baronari, Saptapadi, Indrani, Deya Neya, PotheHolo Deri, Sabarmoti*, and many others. We will, however, take one example to make our point: *Pothe Holo Deri*. Uttam Kumar plays the quintessential middle-class man aspiring to be a doctor, while Suchitra Sen is the daughter of a wealthy family in the city. Suchitra accepts Uttam Kumar as her husband in an informal setting and gives him her mother's jewelry to fund his studies abroad: "You must go; you must succeed". And this is exactly what happened. The young man went abroad to become a successful doctor.

At the end of the sixties, Bengali consciousness felt yet another touch of a rot settling in. The failure of Nehru's five-year plans, the loss of credibility of "Gareebi Hatao" ("Away with poverty") slogans during the early years of the seventies, the massive Naxalite movement in West Bengal, all brought with it a sense of overwhelming disillusionment.

As times changed, 'star' Uttam Kumar also adjusted his curated image to fit his times better. We can see this change in films like *Ekhane Pinjar, Alor Thikana, Nagar Darpane, Dui Prithibi*.

Ever Virtuous, Always True

Soumitra Chatterjee had once commented on Uttam Kumar, "Characters like the eldest son of a large family, taking responsibility for his many brothers and sisters and ageing parents, are often asked to sacrifice his own life in silence for the sake of the family. This has become quite an archetype in Bengali society. I have seen my own father take responsibility for his entire family like this. Uttam Kumar was brilliant in roles like these…"

If one looks closely at Chatterjee's comment, it becomes abundantly clear that these social archetypes left a lasting imprint on Uttam Kumar's acting career. More often than not, cinematic narratives and personal experiences crossed into each other seamlessly for the great star. Uttam's father worked as a projectionist and was the only earning member of the family. Being a member of a typical large, Bengali middle-class family, Uttam had to 'struggle' quite a lot for success. If we look at *Basu Paribar*, Uttam's first successful film, and his last, *Dui Prithibi*, we notice that he is the eldest brother, standing at the head of large joint families in both films.

'Struggle' was never an unfamiliar term for Uttam Kumar. Before becoming a cultural phenomenon, he had to juggle several responsibilities himself to establish himself on the biggest stage. Since he attended evening college classes in Kolkata, he would spend his mornings swimming before going to learn classical music. There was almost no time to stop for lunch as his afternoons were spent going around from one studio to another or visiting the organizers of musical functions (*"Jalsa")* looking for opportunities. There was nothing he wouldn't do looking for a break, either through acting or singing. Sometimes he would run across his younger brother, Tarunkumar, who would enquire about his progress. Melancholic but never defeated, Uttam would smile and say, "I have to do something with my life, Buro, be it as an actor or as a singer". Ever confident, ever optimistic, a determined young man in Kolkata would declare, "If I get the opportunity, I will show them all, Buro. I will be something special, an actor or a singer, not like anyone before me". Eventually, he did become 'something special' unlike anyone had ever seen and unlike anyone would ever see. His acting journey was a testament to creating a unique brand of stardom be speckled with a certain romantic mannerism that people could only associate and expect from him. However, he was also adept at playing several character roles mostly without the typicality of his carefully curated 'stardom'. Films like *Dui Bhai, Thana theke Aschi, Chowrongee, Nishipadma, EkhanePinjar, Jodi Jantem, Jodubonsho, Agniswar, Asadharan, Nagar Darpane* come to mind.

Every film, every character, every plot shows Uttam Kumar as someone 'larger than life'. From the complexities of interpersonal relationships to societal dynamics, he looms large as a moral guardian, a solution to unsolvable problems, a herald of Bengali conscience.

After his death, at a memorial meeting held at Technicians Studio, Satyajit Ray acknowledged: "There is no one like Uttam, and there never will be anyone like Uttam."

Translation from Bengali: Riddha Das Roy

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