Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

Somshankar Ray

Uttam Kumar: His Penmanship Was More Eloquent Than His Acting

He is the evergreen romantic hero of the Bengali middle class. That is why generally little attention has been paid to the thoughts and musings of Arunkumar Chatterjee (Uttam Kumar). Many are still unaware of his considerable talent as an author. Currently, efforts are on to compile his scattered writings. While observing the *Mahanayak*'s (supreme hero) birth centenary it would be appropriate to study his publications and analyse his personality as reflected in them. If we read his works carefully, we would discover a refreshingly different Uttam Kumar who was sensitive, reflective and a serious cultivator of knowledge.

His most important compositions were his two autobiographies. Uttam Kumar initially tried his hand in writing a memoir in 1960. From *Poila Baisakh* or the first day of the Bengali New Year he started writing an autobiography titled *Hariye Jaoa Din guli Mor* (My bygone days). This was serialized in the *Nabakallol* magazine till the month of *Baisakh* in 1962. Then it was left incomplete.

While writing this Uttam Kumar was around 35 years old. He was at the peak as a film star. Naturally he could not offer a perfect self assessment as an actor in this work. Neither did he attempt analysis of all his films. In this autobiography his anonymous early days and the initial forays in acting were described. He told the readers a pleasant anecdote regarding the change of his name from Arunkumar to Uttam Kumar. Readers came to know of Uttam's birth in a common middle class family, his school days, pursuing graduation in commerce against his wishes, leaving formal studies after passing intermediate stage in commerce (I. Com), taking up a petty clerical job and mentally preparing to carry on with the impoverished life of a clerk. However, beneath this drab existence we note the gradual flowering of an artistic mindset right from Uttam's boyhood. As a young man he tried his best to get a break in film acting. But he did not enjoy any influential backing. Expectedly, success was hard to come by. In his autobiography he frankly discussed those pessimistic days. Uttam narrated how he went unsuccessfully from door to door for a chance to act, how he was paid just 13 and half rupees for an insignificant role, how he endured unimaginable taunts and insults, including the nickname *Flop master general*, from most unworthy persons and his personal frustrations. At first films featuring him as a hero completely failed in the box office. So going against his artistic self Uttam had to carry on with his unfulfilling office job for quite a while. In the meanwhile, he was in love with Gauri Debi. In the common Bengali parlance, Uttam was not the ideal bridegroom. He held an ordinary office post. Besides instead of concentrating on his profession Uttam remained engrossed in acting. Therefore, he was apprehensive of Gauri Debi and her family's response. Possibly undergoing this anxiety later enabled him to portray the insolvent romantic hero so successfully on the silver screen. Ultimately Gauri Debi, of course, made the perfect choice.

The recollections of Uttam Kumar attained serious heights owing to his profound social consciousness and understanding of life. Uttam Kumar faithfully described the Kolkata of his college days. In the 1940s the second World War and the Bengal famine had cast their dark shadows on this city. The Bengali bhadraloks, newspapers in hand, raised storm in the teacups arguing whether England or Germany would ultimately win the war. Most of these common gentry, afraid of Japanese air raids, despatched their families too far -off native villages. They themselves were forced to remain in Kolkata to retain their petty office jobs. Uttam Kumar painfully recalled how poor peasants affected by the Bengal famine flocked to Kolkata piteously crying for a spoonful of gruel (*Ma fan dao*). The infamous communal riots of 1946 found place in his musings. He observed that the rhythm of common Bengali middle class life was rudely disturbed by this event. Taking advantage of this social disorder after the riots some taxi drivers used to indulge in despicable activities like eve teasing in front of the lane along which Uttam's house was situated. Young Uttam Kumar along with his friends beat up those unruly drivers and subdued them. Uttam was seriously injured and things might have taken a worse turn. This incident proved Uttam's sense of social responsibility.

Usually, Uttam Kumar is regarded as merely a star of popular commercial films. But his personal account revealed that he indeed had a serious understanding of film making and technology. Here he explained the careful preparation necessary for a simple shot of just a few minutes and the effort required to give the perfect expression. He urged the directors to discuss the characters to be portrayed with the actors before the shoot. Uttam stressed that the actors must become one with the characters they were portraying. He provided the inspiring example of the great mentor of acting, Sishir Bhaduri. He discussed the role of the film distribution companies located primarily in Dharmatala, Central Kolkata. Thus, we see that Uttam Kumar was truly dedicated to his profession even while at the peak of his fame.

The text attains distinction owing to the reflection of Uttam Kumar's intense understanding of life in it. He, despite being a superstar, dispassionately dismantled the fairy tale image of the glamour world which the common people cherished in their hearts. He dismissed the notion that the film stars resided in a colourful dream world. He informed the audience that Uttam Kumar of real life and reel life had nothing in common. He was no fairy tale prince but as ordinary as his spectators. He stated that the thespian life was not that luxurious and could be rather monotonous over the years.

This deep realization about human existence is evident in his second autobiography, *Amar Ami* (About Myself). After leaving his first opus incomplete in 1962, Uttam Kumar did not want to pen his life story again. However, in the early 1970s, submitting to repeated requests from his favourite young journalist Gaurangaprasad Ghosh, Uttam Kumar planned another memoir. Owing to his busy schedule, Uttam used to narrate the saga of his life while Gaurangaprasad wrote it down. Later the hero made necessary changes in the script. In such fashion, as if Uttam Kumar was writing in first person, this document was first serialized in *Prasad* magazine. In 1972 Uttam Kumar's brief autobiography was published as a book. The famous author Bimal Mitra named it, *Amar Ami*. Later an updated version was published in 1974. Over the next few years Uttam Kumar shared much confidential information with Gaurangaprasad. But before a text approved by him could be prepared based on these Uttam Kumar died unexpectedly in July 1980. After this, between 5th and 20th August Gaurangaprasad, with the help of other confidants of Uttam Kumar, prepared a verified manuscript. He added this to the already available text, and published a fresh edition of *Amar Ami* in 1980 only.

In the preface Gaurangaprasad stated that he was never dazzled by the stardom of the great hero. He wanted to understand the normal individual behind the mask of the charismatic actor. He studied Uttam Kumar's personality like a researcher and appreciated that Uttam had to walk along the hostile path of life with bloodied feet as if on a razor's edge. So a serious analysis of Uttam Kumar's psychology is found in this work. In the main text Uttam Kumar admitted in the very beginning, 'I am surrounded by fearful darkness. The illumination of the silver screen was transitory indeed.' Then we came to know of his sense of history. He said, 'To forget our past is a great crime.' His

intelligent, reflective mindset is impressed on the entire journal. He said that from the first he wanted to act in a natural, life like style and discarded melodrama. He also discussed the art of lip synchronization with the playback singer.

It is nice to see that in this personal story Uttam Kumar repeatedly mentioned his love of pursuit of knowledge. From eighth standard he was a student of South Suburban school. He was aware of the reputation of this institution. He proved to be an attentive student who could quickly focus on studies. He despised shirking work. Uttam recalled with pleasure that he did reasonably well in his matriculation exams with particular good marks in Sanskrit and Maths. He earnestly wanted to complete his higher education and took admission in Govt. college of Commerce. But owing to financial constraints he had to leave academics after passing the intermediate stage in commerce (I. Com) and accept a clerical job. However, he retained his love of books. He was an avid reader of literature. Uttam's wife Gauri Debi, his longstanding companion Supriya Debi, daughter-in-law Mahua Chatterjee and brother Tarunkumar mentioned his reading habit a number of times. Supriya Debi said, 'When there was no shooting Uttam generally spent time in the family library'. According to them, once Uttam concentrated on a good book, he gradually forgot the outside world. To portray the character of the hero Bhootnath Uttam started to read Bimal Mitra's best selling novel *Saheb Bibi Golam* once. He became so immersed in the volume that he forgot the essential household duties and almost no cooking was done for the day. His wife Gauri Debi, of course, accepted the lapse in good humour. On his last birthday a rising heroine brought another successful tome by Bimal Mitra, *Kodi diye Kinlam*. Uttam was really happy to receive the gift.

He kept a keen eye on the education of his only son Gautam. His colleague, the learned actor Basanta Chaudhuri, advised him to do so. Uttam recalled in his autobiography that one day he returned home exhausted after shooting and found his son inattentive towards studies. He lost his cool and beat up Gautam. So serious was the thespian about academics. In his memoirs Uttam respectfully remembered those great intellectuals who passed away in his lifetime. They included scientist Satyen Bose, linguist Sunitikumar Chatterjee and historian RC Majumdar. He pleasantly mentioned that the screenplay of the historical film *Bhola Moira*, in which he played the hero, was written by a professor of Rabindra Bharati University, Bibhuti Mukherjee. This shows that Uttam Kumar cordially respected the academicians.

The cultivation of knowledge made Uttam Kumar contemplative and socially conscious. Besides studies, he regularly participated in sports and swimming. Right from his boyhood he wrote stories, poems, brought out a handwritten magazine and learnt painting. He established the Lunar Club with his friends. In the turmoil of the 1942 Quit India movement the magazine was discontinued and the club was shut down. However, young Uttam Kumar participated in the Freedom struggle with genuine enthusiasm. He walked in morning processions with his young friends in Bhabanipur, south Kolkata, singing patriotic songs, waving tricolor flags. He composed songs and set them to tune. Right from his

childhood he was serious about learning music. Later he organised morning processions in support of Netaji Subhas Bose and *Azad Hind Fauj*. He composed an elegy on the birthday of Netaji. He staged a play based on the patriotic novel, *Anandamath*, with his Lunar Club friends and handed over Rs 1700 to the revolutionary Satishchandra Basu. In those days it was quite a lot of money. Later, during the communal disturbances of 1946 he once organised processions and composed songs to promote cultural amity. He reflected on these incidents in *Amar Ami*. Later co-writer Gaurangaprasad recovered the songs and added them to the main text.

In *Amar Ami* Uttam mentioned several other incidents which showcased his sense of social responsibility. He helped insolvent cine-workers and technicians times out of number. In those days load-shedding was a problem which persistently hampered film shooting. Uttam repeatedly led deputations to the Govt with appeals to redress the issue. He protested vehemently when the young and promising actor Anil Chatterjee was mistreated on the set by the producer. He poignantly remarked on the sorry state of the medical facilities in the state and the resultant sufferings of the common people. He came to realise, 'Death is the ultimate reality'.

This introspection is found in other short articles written by Uttam Kumar. Many of these essays, mostly written for various popular periodicals have now been compiled. In *Alor Pipasa* (Thirst for Light, 1968) he frankly expressed his disillusionment about the silver screen world, the fantasy of the common people. He observed that his optimism about the tinsel town had largely faded. The spotlight that surrounded him was largely illusory and grim darkness lay beyond. He appreciated that mere mortals leading quiet lives inhabited the satisfying real world. There, at least, nothing was fake. He hoped to join them leaving behind his make-believe bubble. Such soul searching is evident in his other essays as well. Once, before his death, he lamented, 'I am Uttam Kumar! Still my desires remain unfulfilled. I don't get the little things I love in everyday life.'

Here we note his pining for a return to tranquil life. But the innumerable enthusiasts who went crazy over him won't allow him to settle into a normal existence. He recognized this and sighed, 'Do you know the greatest paradox in the life of a star ? The common fans. They are our greatest friends and our greatest foes as well.' Owing to this realization Uttam tried to break away from playing the superficial romantic hero of *run of the mill* commercial movies which the average admirer cherished so much. Right

from his palmy days he broke the mould and acted in various character roles. He said, ' Variety is the essence of life.... one cannot live without variety.'

From his publications it is evident that he felt concerned about the situation of the Bengali movie industry. He understood that Tollywood must look beyond the palpable love story formula. He noted that by 1970 Bengali film making had improved technologically but its content remained shallow and melodramatic. New good actors were not coming up either. Theatre actors often did not make good film actors. Besides, he appreciated that unlike advanced countries, there was no good film-study institution in his state.

To appeal to a larger audience Uttam Kumar wanted the Bengali industry to make middle path entertaining movies based on good literature. He neither liked unnecessarily complicated art house cinema nor mindless Hindi potboilers exhibiting a curious mix of colourful song, dance, fighting and exotic locations. He stressed on the quality of the screenplay. This again reminds us of his love of reading. In the article *Amar Kabita Pora* (My Poetry Reading, 1974) he said that he regularly read the compositions of contemporary poets like Sunil Ganguly, Shakti Chatterjee, Subhas Mukherjee and other lesser known ones. He expressed his deep admiration for Tagore as well. In such short articles Uttam Kumar discussed various topics and personal issues in a witty and cordial fashion. He unhesitatingly described the early struggle to find his feet. At the same time he was shocked to discover that it would not be possible to sit easy even after attaining fame. Such was the public craze for Uttam that he could not grab a mouthful in a party even at 1.30 am as admirers jostled around him that late at night. Once he had to rush to a function without having his dinner as impatient freaks would have beaten up the organiser otherwise. Then on their demand he had to start singing at the dead of the night. Appropriately he sang, '*Jene Sune Bish Korechhi Paan* (I have consumed poison knowingly)'. Thus, we see while in adversity he retained his sense of humour. He even cracked jokes at his own expense. Referring to scandalous gossips floating in the air about him he wrote, 'They say that I am not a particularly good fellow!' He frankly admitted that on rare occasions he did lose his temper.

He made intelligent assessments of the famous personalities he came across like Satyajit Ray, Suchitra Sen, Hemanta

Mukherjee and magician P.C. Sorcar senior. He was delighted by the unexpectedly down to earth personality of Satyajit Ray (1971 *Ghoroa* magazine). He was highly impressed by the naturalistic film-making approach of Ray. By the mid 1960s Uttam felt unfulfilled while acting in mainstream Bengali movies. But the direction of Satyajit Ray, during the shoot of *Nayak* (1966), helped him to correct his flaws and add refreshing dimensions to his acting. Uttam had genuine appreciation for his immortal on-screen romantic partner Suchitra Sen. He said that people mistakenly assumed that she was arrogant (1971 *Prasad*). Actually she was calm and serious. She did not allow unwanted strangers in the movie set because that would disturb the intense concentration necessary to portray a scene successfully. However she had a real sense of humour. Uttam profoundly admired another artist, who along with Suchitra Sen, contributed to the aura about him. He was Hemanta Mukherjee whose golden voice became synonymous with Uttam's on the silver screen. They knew each other from their early days of struggle. Uttam felt nostalgic whenever he heard Hemanta singing. Uttam acknowledged that Hemanta had an ethereal voice and he excelled in *Rabindra sangeet* as well as popular film songs. Uttam's love of music is evident in this article (*Prasad*). P.C. Sorcar did not belong to the film world, but besides others, he mesmerized Uttam Kumar with his cheerful personality. Uttam expressed his admiration for the internationally renowned magician though he admitted that he was novice about magic (*Cinema Jagat*, 1968)

Uttam Kumar does not enjoy a prominent place in the intellectual discourse regarding Bengali culture. Misfortune dogged him throughout his life. So he could not arrange his literature properly and place them in public space. However, we pleasantly discover after going through Uttam Kumar's considerable compositions that he was a good writer indeed. A meticulous study of his volumes brings forth an artist who seriously wished to learn from both his countrymen and foreigners. He freely acknowledged the constructive influence of Satyajit Ray on him. His penmanship reveals that in no way Uttam Kumar was frivolous. Besides, he was not affected by egoism. In his manuscripts he sincerely expressed his desire to cast off the pompous costume of a film star and resume the existence of a simple cultured gentleman.

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5 Various books and articles on Uttam Kumar

Dr. Somshankar Ray is an Assistant Professor of History at Vidyasagar College for Women, Kolkata.