

The Heroic Laughter of Modernity: The life, cinema and afterlife of a Bengali matinee idol



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Hollywood may have lost much of its enchantment, but the God and heroes it created are fixed forever in the universal dreams. David Robinson (1975)

Some days ago I saw my film *Nayak* after a gap of ten or maybe twelve years. Many of you must have seen it too. I saw the film with rapt attention and have detected few issues with my direction. I doubt my own volition, aspects of my work and the conditions in which I have to work and I am not surprised that I am yet to make a perfect film. But did

you see Uttam Kumar? In a two-hour film that centers around him, he is perfect from every angle, in every scene. The story, the script, the making is mine. But Uttam made it his own with the charisma and effortlessness that only an actor of his caliber could do. Discerning viewers of cinema can identify the difference between good performance extolled by the filmmaker and performance that is endowed with the gifts intrinsic to the performer. And I can vouch for the fact that Uttam excelled in the second. I find no fault with him as an actor [...] There is none like him and there will be no one to ever replace him. He was and he is unparalleled in Bengali, even Indian cinema. Satyajit Ray (1980)

May 6th, July 1966. The previous evening Satyajit Ray – the world-feted arthouse director of Bengali cinema, called up Uttam Kumar, Bengali matinee idol and the protagonist of his new film *Nayak: The Hero* (*Nayak*, 1966). 'Uttam, tomorrow is the premiere of *Nayak* at Indira Cinema. I hope you will be there,' Ray said. 'But Manikda, [Ray's nickname that everyone close to him called him by] you know how it is. The press and public will be there. Do you think I should go? There will be pandemonium,' Uttam Kumar tried to reason. 'Uttam, it's a Satyajit Ray film. Please be there.'

By early morning of 6 May, the news was out. Uttam Kumar was to be present at the premiere of his new film. Soon, all hell broke loose. By late afternoon, roads leading to the theatre had to be barricaded. Police were out in hordes to manage the crowd, which was swelling by the minute. Uttam Kumar's car had to make endless stoppages and had to be piloted through

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the lanes and bylanes to enable him to reach the venue. The theatre was chock-a-block. Uttam Kumar had to be escorted inside by the police. The screening began and within minutes started the uproarious greeting. 'Guru', 'Guru' (in local parlance, which means something between 'the master' and 'the champion'). People went berserk. It was impossible to continue with the screening. The hall manager rushed to Ray. 'Sir, if we don't bring him up on stage there will be a serious law and order problem.' Minutes later, the lights came on and Uttam Kumar was ushered onto the platform in front of the screen. He raised his hand. The crowd fell silent, as if with a magic wand. 'I request you to please maintain silence and watch the film. It is a Satyajit Ray film. Please.'

Years later, it was Thursday. By the late hour, Uttam Kumar lay lifeless in Belle View Hospital in South Calcutta. Even before the doctors could sign the certificate his brother, the actor Tarun Kumar, brought his body home to Bhawanipore, the upper-middle-class south Calcutta locality that was once Uttam Kumar's home, but not anymore. Here he was wretched by family members and one woman named Roma – better known as the luminous Suchitra Sen, the iconic actor's most famous on-screen partner. It was 12:40 at night. Only a day ago, Kumar was busy shooting a film. He complained of chest pain and was hospitalized late that night. He had had a heart attack. Next morning he was feeling better. But things deteriorated in the early evening and at around 9:30 that night, he was declared dead. It was 24 July 1980. The day was to be marked permanently in the crowded annals of Calcutta, a city, which in the twentieth century has rarely let history pass it by without having made a mark.

Within hours of Roma having wretched the man she had romanced so many times on-screen, dawn broke. And the news broke out. July 25th, 1980. The newspapers bugle the demise of the matinee idol. By late morning, the whole of Calcutta is in a state of mourning. Thousands march towards his Bhawanipore home. The city had never seen a day like this since the death of Nobel Laureate Poet Rabindranath Tagore almost forty years ago. The *Nayak* – the hero – was dead. The greatest screen legend ever to grace Bengali cinema was no more. He was only 54. His favourite city, the city of his birth and work,

which had queued up unflinching every week for over three decades to see him on celluloid, had assembled to see him one last time. Literally, Calcutta halted to a stop to say adieu to its *darling*. As far as one could see, there were countless heads – restive, plaintive. As far as one could see, people were howling. Mourning without end. Like they do for a near kin. Calcutta's box office draw of the century had, even in his death, sucked the attention of an entire population. For one last time. In life and in death, Kumar remained the darling of the people, a focal point of mass hysteria.

While his hearse was being carried atop a sea of people from his house to the Technician's Studio down the choked Ashutosh Mukherjee Road, a few kilometres away at Alimudin Street, in a closed room filled with cigar smoke, sat a few bespectacled men, in starch white *kurta* and *dhoti*. This was the meeting room of the apparatus of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the governing party of the state of Bengal. Letting a pall of smoke out of his Havana Cigar, Pramode Dasgupta or PDG, the Party Tsar (officially, Party's General Secretary) asked his comrades, 'Is our government associating itself with the funeral of a Tollygunge (the generic name of the local film industry) matinee idol?' Without haste, the resounding verdict was no. *The government of the people* as the CPIM had peddled itself to be, was not comfortable in associating itself with the 'commercially assuaged' leading figure of a bourgeois culture called cinema. Uttam Kumar must have been for them the indiscreet charm of the bourgeoisie. This was 1980. Communist pretensions were still at large across the globe. Later on the same day after lunch, PDG thumped, 'Tell Buddhadeb [Bhattacharya, then Minister of Culture and Information] that the decision to stay away is right. But Jyoti Babu [The Chief Minister or Head of the Ministerial Cabinet of the local government] wants a wreath to be sent. Go ahead. I have no objection.' Rejected by the government, Uttam Kumar was not laid at Rabindra Sadan, the centre of the CPI(M)'s cultural activity, where before and since him many a public soul, with varying degrees of closeness to the party, rested after death to let citizens pay their last respects, as is a norm in this part of the world. Instead Kumar was laid, wretched in a mountain of white flowers on the porch of a theatre called Purna near his home, where

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32 years ago his first ever film was released, a film in which he had, like Marcello Mastroianni, been an extra! A truly remarkable journey had come to sudden, dramatic end.

The occurrences above, not always verifiable, are yet bound in a single emotional narrative. It is about Uttam Kumar – the handsome, charismatic and phenomenally talented star of Bengali cinema for three decades between 1950 and 1980, who was not just a figure of unmatched adulation and attention, but also in whom merged, much before postmodernism was to dismember hegemony in culture, the unrepentant cohabitation of both the insightful gaze of arthouse cinema and the frenzied prospect of popular aspiration. To that end he is also a unique modernist figure in Indian cinema.

Uttam Kumar had a rewarding artistic career as the leading figure in the Bengali film industry – doubtlessly once the most critically discerning and artistically progressive fraternity among the few language-based film industries that comprise Indian cinema, its all-pervasive Hindi (now Bollywood) industry included. Actually it would be an understatement to say that he was a leading figure. He, much to his own dismay, virtually colonized the industry. In fact, Atlas-like he carried an entire industry on his shoulders, and like Prometheus, gave the industry's underclass as well as its shenanigans, the fire of livelihood for three decades.

Any great actor would want his act, his art, to extend beyond the screen into the continuum, into the great open, into the giant unknown that coalesces into collective memory. Uttam not only managed that effortlessly but seems to be unique in that in his death, he stands like a giant talisman whose shadow seems to grow bigger and bigger over the industry he had once defined.

In other words, 32 years into his afterlife, Uttam Kumar remains what he died as: the greatest icon ever to have graced Bengali cinema. Uttam Kumar has defined one of the most curious cases of 'increasing utility of post-humous value' in any film culture across the globe, a case that must be looked at with as much interest as the calibration that goes into

celebrating what he was in his lifetime. His is a strange case of immortality that was prescient in his life and is assured in his afterlife.

But what accounts for such an undying popularity? His outstanding work as an actor and then producer and the cult that built around him of course stands vigil to his name. Also, as cultural theorists keenly note, the importance of annals, cultural anecdotes, popular gossip and industry talk surrounding public figures can never be underestimated. Uttam Kumar had his stake of personal controversies, though he was not a man comfortable with lending his name to wanton sleaze and muddle. But for what is a vintage case of matinee idolatry on the part of his ever-growing spectatorship that often broke the boundaries of economic, cultural and definitely gender classifications, a little bit of personal overreach accentuated the aura. While saying so, it would be good to remember that cinema itself is a product of the modern industrial age, where proliferation of information is the other name of publicity. But Uttam Kumar is both a classic case of matinee idolatry and a unique case in cultural history. There are no easy answers to those enquiring into his case, a case that has lately been bolstered by attempts at Kumar's political appropriation.

Kumar was already a *political subject*, as the communist unease with him shows. In fact the communists later came under fire in public forums for denying Uttam Kumar even a perfunctory state service. Incidentally the Trevi Fountain in Rome, associated with his role in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), was turned off and draped in black as a tribute to Marcello Mastroianni on his death in 1996. After Kumar's death, the people who adored and worshipped Kumar unflinchingly expected something similarly significant and unambiguous from the government. But such was the arrogance of local-bred communists that they always failed to realize the role of the *public* beyond the reach and riches of political mobilization, as signified unequivocally during Kumar's funeral. This lapse assumes much greater significance in the current political climate of Bengal, when so many years after his death, Kumar's

name, though far from lost, is being exhumed unabashedly for political gain by those to whom the unseated communists have been forced to bequeath power.

That Kumar's name and fame is still fit for political appropriation shows not just the degree of his posthumous popularity but also the despondency of the new ruling party to penetrate a middle-class constituency. The current government wrested power from the incumbent communists largely by virtue of its mobilization of classes outside the middle class. In order to sufficiently arouse middle-class interest in the government that assumed office in May 2010, the government wanted to capitalize on the Bengali middle class's most closely held talismans: Poet Rabindranath Tagore and Uttam Kumar. Tagore of course is a figure of universal repute. But Kumar was just a matinee idol, an actor of some serious talent doubtlessly but no universal figure and there are other much more globally feted figures who are perhaps better signifiers of the middle class's cultural self-fashioning in Bengal. But no, it had to be Uttam Kumar because he is beyond any serious threat to his name, beyond the cultural atavism of a particular class, beyond any partisan interest. In short, he is safely appropriable.

It started during the opposition's election campaign when part of its election promise centred on the institutionalized celebration that the *then* opposition promised erect around Kumar's already tall name. It needs to be noted that Kumar's death anniversary every year for the last 32 years is usually considered a public day, marked through remembrance of his genius, several retrospective screenings of his films and other sundry activities all of which reinforce his continuing relevance. Now that it has been brought to power, the promise to serve Kumar's lasting legacy having borne fruit, the new government has announced a slew of projects – a permanent memorabilia museum on Kumar, a restoration archive of his cinema, an annual award in his name, a film city, etc. Whether they will see any light of day is another matter but what's critical is that a man dead 32 years ago could still be leveraged politically and successfully.

Ironically, these events will only help, first, to institutionalize what is already a publicly known fact: that Kumar is a major cultural

figure. Second, they show clearly that 32 years after his death, Kumar is as alive, and as much in the centre of a new politicization of culture by virtue of having remained as always, a highly useful magnet for mass mobilization!

This is a crucial aspect of understanding the subject of our discussion but not the most astonishing. The biggest factor of Kumar's legacy, especially so for a cultural theorist, is that keeping his charisma and his persona intact, how could he appeal to a completely new generation of viewers in the last three decades since his death, generations so removed from his time and cultural climate. Whenever we look at his work, we must also look at how he redefined *immortality*, of himself and his art. Kumar was a product of the quicksilver visual profligacy that is intrinsic to his art and was yet so effortlessly beyond it's reductive, deductive and scopophilic manipulation. How could that be? And to get to that we must start by understanding why Uttam Kumar – Bengal's immortal, unrivalled matinee idol – is actually a fascinating study in middle-class cultural iconography.

2

To the western audience, this mythicality of the matinee idol is integral to their understanding of cinema as a mass medium and its citation, both as an object of deification as well as of derision – from Marcello Mastroianni and Jean Paul Belmondo – is often considered *de rigueur* of New Wave cinema. Godly men in sartorial three-piece, often behind dark glasses, battling the trails of fame and fortune as Tinsel town charmers or acting as their own caricature is a much hallowed cinematic sub-genre. This was preceded by the era of Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster and Humphrey Bogart, the era of the Hollywood studio star. In fact, as is well known, there was an entire industry that was unleashed to control, manipulate and subjectify matinee idolatry/the star system in Hollywood. Richard Dyer's seminal *Stars* (1979), Christine Gledhill's *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (1991) and more recently Paul McDonald's *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (2000) have elaborated, with both authority and insight, the entire process of making meaning inside the Hollywood stardom clique.

Stars, they conclude, are not only a product of a climate-controlled system of capital, labour and the proliferation of image-making – often repetitively, tediously so – but are also a union of the phenomenon of both production and consumption. By the latter they meant that in stars co-habited the studio and the public, the first trying to extol his/her appeal while the latter madly reinforcing it. Stars would inevitably dwarf script and direction to establish a direct contact with the audience, a contact unhindered by either the role or the setting (often at the cost of causing harm to serious cinema). This much told story is important to identify a historicity of stars (stardom). But at the same time it is important to enquire into stardom's a-historicity – in the sense of it subverting age, fashion, taste and a value-induced economy of culture while remaining steeped in the production/consumption ethic of a particular time. Stardom's inevitability in cinema makes imperative that we study not only the settings which made them but also their legacy and what has worked to keep their value as cultural memory intact decades after their time.

We must note both these aspects while reading Uttam Kumar's stardom. To start with, the studio-system could only nurture Bengali cinema up to its days of young adulthood. Calcutta and almost immediately Bombay (now Mumbai) was the seat of the cinema industry in India and the first generation of film-makers did set up studios in accordance with global practices. New Theatres and Movietone are two of the iconic studios in Calcutta, which were based on the repertory system of paid actors and technicians and controlled distribution. But by the late 1940s, largely because of new commercial interests, the passing away of visionary men who had set them up, new censorship laws, the wave of nationalist ethic sweeping across the country and other factors, the studio system declined in India. By the time Uttam Kumar started working (in his first film in 1948, aged 22), the studio system was giving way to a more free-flowing film-making and distribution practice.

There were no stars in the early phase of Bengali cinema but popular actors, like Pramathesh Barua, who were linked organically to the studios of the era. The rise of Uttam Kumar to fame in the early 1950s coincided with the demise of the studios and the rise of individual mak-

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ers, producers and banners. So in a way and ironically, the biggest star of Bengali cinema was born out of the ruins of the studio-system and not because of it. Perhaps that's one reason why, as his popularity grew to phenomenal proportions by the mid-1950s, the commercial industry was happy to lodge behind him so unquestioningly and so wholeheartedly.

In fact, Bengali cinema's advent into modernity in the early 1950s saw two distinct narrative and aesthetic practices. If one, embodied by the likes of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, created the cult of 'new art cinema', the other took umbrage under the name and fame, the appeal and cult of Uttam Kumar.

Kumar was born in 1926 and had an undistinguished life in school and college. He had been trying his luck at professional theatre when he made his film debut in 1948 with *Drishtidan*. He worked till 1980. His first commercial success came with the 1952 hits *Basu Paribar* and *Sare Chuattor*, which also launched, incidentally, his legendary pairing with actor Suchitra Sen. The year 1952 was also the year of the making of Ritwik Ghatak's unreleased debut film *Nagarik* which along with Nemai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* remain two of the early precursors of Ray's *Song of the Road (Pather Panchali)* and now recognized as seminal to the Indian New Wave.

Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen went on to pair in some of the classic romantic melodramas of the time – *Agnipariksha Soptopodi*, *Pothe Holo Deri*, *Harano Sur*, *Chaowa-Paowa*, *Bipasha*, *Sagorika*, etc. The films established them as a leading romantic pair, emboldened the industry's finances and gave a cheer to the beleaguered collective imagination of the mass audience in Bengal.

Uttam acted in 202 censor-certified films, having almost a dozen releases every year between 1956 and 1960. By the late 1950s he had also produced a few of his own films to considerable acclaim and was always seen as trying to break out of the mould of the *romantic hero* and trying to add new dimensions to the characters while sticking to an endearing and apparently simpler template of the romantic hero. He managed

to act with every major popular and arthouse director as well as actress of his time and managed to create a certain chemistry with all of his leading ladies on-screen, notwithstanding the pairing with Sen. Like the myriad characters he played, this chemistry with his actresses was also subtly, tonally different from each other. If with Sen the pairing was about tragic-comic romance, with Sabitri Chatterjee it was genial comedy (*Bhrantibilas*, *Dhonni Meye*), with Supriya Chowdhuri, sensual complexity (*Kal Tumi Aleya*, *Sudhu Ekti Bochor*) and with Arundhati Debi, matured couplehood (*Bicharak*, *Jotugriha*).

In the case of Kumar, the black-and-white romance was, as expected, the art-de rigueur of his stardom. Here we must briefly note the context in which his fame cemented in the early to mid-1950s. The Bengali film industry had, by the early 1950s, been about three decades old. Under colonial (British India) policies, first the silent films and then the studio-backed talkies (1930s to the end of the 1940s) had their own aesthetic, commercial and cultural logic, and most of it, as discussed, was dominated by the studios.

As many studies of post-Independence Indian cinema have shown, with the advent of the Nehruvian era (so-called after the quasi-socialist imperative of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of Independent India who assumed office in 1947), newer claims were made of cinema. Post-colonial Indian cinema and surely Bengali cinema found itself in need of serious reconstruction. Hence it would not be wrong to consider the early years of the 1950s, when Uttam Kumar debuted, as fledgling years for this new cinema industry. Though not immediately burdened by the cross of 'social relevance' like the parallel cinema movement that burst onto the scene almost at the same time (Ray's *Song of the Road* being a universally recognized case), popular cinema had to keep its own credulity in mind. Popular cinema was entertainment surely but intelligent, socially relevant entertainment.

Moreover, for Bengali cinema, the 1950s was a period of great tension and upheaval following the Great Partition of the late 1940s and early 1950s, which saw huge movement of people and goods from Bangladesh to Bengal. Partition changed Bengal's economy and culture irreversibly. Kumar's black-and-white romance films,

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which once epitomized his career and which he embodied, must be seen in the context of this social capital, especially throughout the 1950s. No wonder even the best of his romance films (some more of them being *Indrani*, *Bipasha*, *Chawwa Pawa*, *Shilpi*) could never become complete escapades into the fantastic but in fact were rooted in the economies of social and cultural capital. Housing problems, poverty, unemployment, arriviste anxieties, urban loneliness, middle-class moral coda, the tragic life of true artists, etc. were serious themes often woven around the central theme of romance which made even his most commercially assuaged cinema a critical social document. In fact much of the charm of Kumar lay in the characters of his early films being extraordinary in their deliverance even in the most mundane or trying of circumstances. In other words his films did not provide an escape from the mundane but an honest effort to overcome its pettiness, they provided no sanctimony of morality but genuine, earnest aspiration towards a greater common good. Of course a whole bunch of talented writers, makers, technicians, staff and producers were involved but they conglomerated around the believable figure of Uttam Kumar, who gave them the commercial safety while his films hardly betrayed the easy sympathy he shared with even the poorest of his spectators. Uttam Kumar – by an interesting concoction of natural talent, cultural essentialism, social mobility, economic stasis and newfound political freedom – came to embody an archetype which every Bengali spectator aspired to or felt empathy for. Uttam, in his films, was everyman and yet the only one who could become truly one.

But Kumar was always hungry to grow as an actor. And what divides the complex, second phase of his career from the earlier, simpler phase of his stardom, Kumar most gradually shifted to, and then successfully represented the crossover genre in Indian cinema. A decade into a successful career as a matinee idol, by

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the 1960s, Kumar regularly promoted a more self-consciously crossover genre of cinema, apart from the romance genre which sustained his popularity. These films (*Khokababur Protyaborton*, *Thana Theke Aschi*, *Kal Tumi Aleya*, *Kokhono Megh*, *Ami*, *Se O Sakha*, *Nagar Darpan*, *Jodubonsho*, *Baghbandi Khela*) had their popular trappings: popular actors, an eye on commerce, but also a strong storyline, carefully drawn characters, a degree of evolved realism and deeply etched moments of drama. And most importantly, they avoided the safety net of *hero-meets heroine* routine or Uttam Kumar as a romantic hero. Instead he plays a variety of complex, often ageing and helpless – even contrarian – characters that stand in opposition to the long-held image of a romantic hero with gifts to overcome every impediment to love and a middle-class search for security. This was a radical shift and one which cemented his reputation as not just a star but also an actor of great range and intelligence.

Moreover, though he could never completely eschew his mannerisms, so typical of acting cultures that he inherited, he could put all his performances into neatly divided and appreciable identities, which spanned almost every aspect of middle-class life. In fact, no single entity in the history of Bengali culture has so neatly embodied, both the limits and illusions of the middle class. It is both the genesis and the best reason behind his enduring appeal.

So Kumar, as much as he imbibed a technical, logistic and organized film manufacturing tradition, found himself in a position to redefine that tradition, and he did masterfully. He helped evolve a new storytelling practice, a new characterization, a new reception culture and of course, a new definition of stardom. In the process, as is common in the culture industry, he stood at the forefront of a new tradition, a new popular cinema. He had so completely personified this genre of film-making, both the black-and-white romance and the serious crossover genre, that both vanished after his death. (By the 1980s, black-and-white of

course was outdated but the easy charm of the romance was not, and though Kumar had long since forgone playing those characters, none of the new actors and film-makers could rekindle or replenish the romance formula.) His death in fact left Bengali cinema deeply divided into categories of entertainment (mostly gaudy, sickening melodrama – in the popular sense) and morbid arthouse cinema.

Kumar was abundantly and numerously feted. He was the first winner of the newly constituted National Award for Best Actor (Bharat Award) in 1967, which he won for Satyajit Ray's *The Zoo* (*Chiriyakhana*, 1967) and Sunnil Banerjee's *Antony Firingee* (1967). Incidentally the setting of Ray's *Nayak*, made a year before in 1966, was that of the actor travelling to Delhi to collect a prestigious award. *Nayak* also won the Special Jury Award at the 'Berlin Film Festival' to which Uttam Kumar accompanied Ray.

3

Kumar's exceptional range as an actor and cult as a matinee idol is best examined through one Ray film already mentioned. Satyajit Ray was so impressed and intrigued by the phenomenal popularity of Uttam Kumar that he was inspired to write what was his second original screenplay (after *Kanchenjunga* in 1962) around the myth that Kumar found himself enveloped by. This became the celebrated, deconstructive *Nayak: The Hero*. In his own admission Ray, who stood clear of celluloid glamour and a commercially assuaging film economy, wanted to understand the phenomenon of the matinee idol, his rise to fame from a humble middle-class upbringing, the perils of the ownership of an iconic name, his vulnerabilities, and the essentially make-believe world of meaning-making in popular cinema and those who populate it. In the stiff upper lip arthouse circles however this choice of casting Uttam Kumar came as a kind of surprise, if not shock. In fact for a legion of Ray loyalists the film was nothing more than an unnecessary detour for the



By Ray's own admission and that of the public at large, Kumar won the day.

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director. In fact, Marie Seton writes in her book on Ray, *Portrait of a Director*:

Some of Ray's admirers, particularly Indians, were and are dubious about *Nayak*. They were rather mystified by the choice of a film star to stand for the Hero image. It was a central character which directors has explored in other countries and more dramatically and with a fiercer bite. The quietness of *Nayak* spread a certain confusion. Not too friendly speculation also centred around the fact that Ray had written the script with the star Uttam Kumar in mind. The expectation seems to have been that having done so, Ray would surely unveil the sordidness of the film industry and the evils of the star system. Instead the Hero is revealed as an actor of some talent, some conscience and a good deal of mediocrity (Seton 1971).

Such disapproval is evident even in Ray's friend and chief critic Chidananda Dasgupta. In his *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* he writes:

Before reaching the nadir of his career, Ray made *Nayak* (1966) from a story he himself wrote and with Uttam Kumar, Bengal's talented matinee idol, as its hero. Like *Kanchanjungha*, again creates a highly symmetrical, tight and four-square framework. The entire action takes place during the hero's one-night train ride to Delhi to collect an award for a performance. Uttam Kumar, an actor of considerable intelligence, sophistication and popularity, is, as it were, playing himself. (1994: 89)

Clearly Kumar had the approval but Ray did not. Most people made the mistake of thinking that Kumar was playing himself but Ray was plying himself into commercial cinema. Dasgupta wrote in the original critique of the film:

It is in turning the hero from a type to an individual that Ray reveals behind the expert craftsmanship, the inner emptiness which appears to plague him in this period. The individual whom he tries to reveal in the

star-type of Arindam Mukherjee is even more typical than the exterior of his personality. The alcoholism, the death wish, the guilt over deserting a purer art of the theatre and the early leftist links, are all more or less part of popular mythology of the film star. (1994: 90)

In an interview some years later to his biographer Andre Robinson, Ray had expressed his dismay about how little he knew about Uttam Kumar's actual life while writing his script. On the other hand none of the above traits mentioned by Dasgupta is true in the case of Kumar's own life as much as they may be for the matinee idol that Ray is trying to portray. If the life of the matinee idol is drawn from a stock of public imagination, it was not true for the matinee idol that the public essentially and unequivocally deifies. So in Arindam Mukherjee we see two matinee idols: one, which Ray imagined, and one, which Kumar is in his own lifetime. This meant that there was a constant tension in the figure of the *hero*. One has to see the film closely to realize how to central figures of two schools of film-making, respectful of each other and yet critically aware of their own positions, are trying to invest, in the singular image of the matinee idol, their most closely held beliefs about cinema. And that is what makes the film the masterpiece it is. By Ray's own admission and that of the public at large, Kumar won the day. The image of the hero is restored at the end of the film and his examination into his own life during a train journey turns into a heroic self-critique of exceptional poignancy. Ray was trying to separate the image of the star from the man while Kumar, deeply aware of the vulnerability of the character he was portraying, ended up *salvaging* the hero from the man. And even if the star did manage to get back to his state of embalment at the end, the actor in Kumar was permanently unleashed for the world to see.

Blame it on his own hunger for a role of a lifetime or his own critique of his stardom, saying yes to *Nayak* was no easy task. Unless supremely confident, a man at the peak of his career would not have let the best-known Indian arthouse director have a peek into the *inner life* of stardom, knowing that this film could punctuate the carefully conjured and manufactured mystique of stardom for the

common audience who would line up every week to see his cinema. *Nayak* was hence not just a film. It was an act of courage on the part of Kumar.

One needs to note that since the film's release and after, the film's easy charm, largely because of the character of the matinee idol (Arindam Mukherjee) who dominates the narrative and the actor who played it effortlessly (Uttam Kumar), has retained huge viewership till this day. Apart from the Apu Trilogy, Ray's own favourite *The Lonely Wife* (*Charulata*, 1964) and two of his films for children, *Nayak* perhaps is the most watched Ray film ever. Especially among the Bengali speaking population. The huge popular appeal of the film in the last two decades has also helped revise its original critical evaluation. Many of the later scholars and critics of Ray and Indian cinema now consider *Nayak* not only an important work but also as closely observant a cultural document as Ray's more feted films as well as the best films of other Indian masters.

Kumar here also decisively won, perhaps unconsciously, a battle on behalf of his fans who were pitted against those of the formidable Soumitra Chatterjee, the other great actor of the times and a Satyajit Ray protégé and staple. The Bengali film-going class was divided down the bone in this period when Ray who, before and after *Nayak* and *The Zoo*, made no less than fourteen films with Chatterjee, came out and casted Kumar as *Nayak*. Kumar excelled and sealed his reputation forever.

Interestingly Uttam Kumar had never played a mythical character in a film, which is a common platform to exploit the traditional mores to sustain extra-cinematic popularity in a country like India. This would definitely signify a rather conscious engagement with modernity, reformation and an urban-middle-class cultural ethic on the part of Uttam Kumar as it was for the industry he lorded over. In fact post-Uttam Kumar Bengali commercial cinema's poverty of thinking could best be blamed for its deviation from the modernity that once sustained it. The entrenched vulgarity of the popular imagination, till now suppressed by a surfeit of modernity, was now unleashed and there was no one to hold it at the gates, a function Kumar and a few others performed with supreme alacrity over the years.

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Eventually the hero had to age. And bowing to that rule, Kumar had made a quiet and resilient shift towards playing even more sombre character roles, in which he increasingly appeared visibly un-heroic. His last five years were performance-wise unremarkable though his reputation was touched. This was because his audience, which was greying with him, was however happy seeing him on-screen as long as his roles offered him a chance to smile. Because he smiled like a benign, youthful God. His laughter as we know now, is actually that of modernity – of both sophistication and sympathy, of ego and of understanding, of next-door charm and universal charisma; about a leanness of thought and expression, a prevalence of the rational and the progressive over the mythical and the stagnant.

No one and perhaps least Uttam Kumar himself cares (if he could), if he is being politically appropriated. A great star and performer is or at least should be always politically relevant and beyond this party or that. And that is what is crucial. And that is why Uttam Kumar lives in the mythopoetics of cultural modernity while emerging so many years into his death, as one of cinema's most talented, charming and undying ambassadors.

Contributor's details

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