

BETWEEN A POPULAR STAR AND A KEEPER OF EVERYDAY CONSCIENCE

by SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY

Uttam Kumar re-engineered the cultural economy of popular cinema in Bengal and went on to helm the star-era all by himself, marking it with over 200 films. A significant share of them added little more than numbers to popular cinema's infamous logic of accumulation. But about fifty films have remained re-collectible in Bengali cultural memory, repeatedly seen, cited and recommended. This is an impressive number by any measure, which is further emboldened by the commercial heft of his films which span much beyond the noteworthy fifty. Most trade estimates reveal that between 1955 and 1975 - the peak years of his stardom - Uttam had an annual average 'turnover' of two blockbuster successes and five films with healthy box office returns - an astonishing feat to have sustained for 20 years.

What is even more noteworthy is that this extraordinary range, duration and mass appeal was sustained on the singular platform of screen stardom, whether as a sophomore or as an ageing star. There were many provocations for Uttam to enhance his cinematic appeal through means outside cinema, but he resisted all temptation to that effect. Unlike his contemporaries in Tamil Cinema, Uttam was never sustained by a mass movement; neither did he ever play a mythological character. Politically, too, he was agnostic, and was never drawn to the wages of pulpit politics, whether it be the powerful Congress camp in the 1960s or the Left in the 1970s.

In his cinema too, he never let a dominant image rest on him, contrary to the mainstream reception of him as a romantic hero. Even within the genre of romantic melodramas, he oversaw a shift - from archaic forms of maudlin social weepies [1] to those that fulfilled every platitude of an archetypal star-vehicle [2]; to those which reflected the changed circumstances in Bengali cultural life and the emergence of a new kind of couple-hood. [3] It is the third type that propelled Uttam (and Suchitra) to stardom. At the same time and despite the stupendous box office success of these romances, Uttam kept breaking away to play everyday characters [4] to satiate his hunger for more substantive roles.

The 1960s were more rewarding for Uttam, for he starred in a variety of rich portrayals. [5] He reached a kind of performative crescendo with Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (The Hero, 1966), a film that won both Uttam and Ray rich accolades at the Berlin Film Festival. The film needs attention [6] separately but the least that can be said about *Nayak* is that as a film that dissected his own screen persona, Uttam faced very atypical challenges to which he rose with commanding grace. He continued to star in at least one memorable film a year till about 1975.

Uttam Kumar suffered a comparative decline of his eminence in the 1970s as he responded to a string of crises in the industry with resigned generosity rather than instincts of self-preservation. But that did not stop him from a series of superlative performances in the mid-70s. [7] When he passed away after losing his battle with a waning heart in 1980, he was only 53. But he died as the star he ever was. The mourning march that accompanied his hearse brought a howling Calcutta to a standstill. A leading Bengali daily headlined it as 'the fall of a titan'.

Uttam Kumar was doubtlessly a star in the textbook sense - steering an entire popular industry and dominating its cultural assets between early the 1950s to the late 1970s. Naturally, he fits into every definition of stardom, whether it is about the semiotic value of aura, [8] the social theory of realization, [9] or the psychoanalytic projection of appropriation. [10] But theoretical definitions of stardom would not be able to uncover Uttam's all-pervading presence in cinema of post-colonial Bengal. *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* says that Uttam's early romances re-invigorated the *bhadralok*, apolitical humanist literary tradition in cinema, but that was only the beginning. Much of the magnetism of the 1950s melodrama lay in the incorporation of a self-assured but companionable *bhadralok* figure. The most significant factor for their appeal is the exploration of *resolutions* to the series of crises that could effortlessly interchange between what was *desirable* and what was *realizable* under the circumstances. And what helped in the abutment of this liberal cause was the clever use of star-value. Hence we must see Uttam's body of work as a complex encounter with modernity itself, and his films as accommodating emancipatory exertions in the meaning of citizenship, fellowship and couple-hood. Hence, if one part of Uttam - the Hollywood-like stardom - can be gauged through the imported form of the melodramas, the other part - his downright 'identifiability' - can be gauged only when one is keyed into the liberal Bengali reworking of the transnational form. This ensured that as much as he was a star of a particular cinematic dispensation, Uttam was also a next-door cultural icon - soliciting fandom, affection, veneration and undying loyalty to his person and persona.

What is interesting and ironic is that Uttam's prolonged, enchanted and addictive stardom managed to exist in surplus of the industry that he dominated- a surplus of star-value that was in excess of the capacity of the industry. This was neither to his liking nor to the benefaction of the industry, as was proved upon his death, which left the popular industry in such a state of decline, that it has barely managed to emerge into health in the last four decades.

Uttam Kumar offers a fascinating study of a celluloid persona who steered and reconstituted the Bengali visual world. He is an idea, if there could be one, to comprehend the riches of popular cinema, as much as it draws attention to the limits of the postcolonial *bhadralok* imaginary.

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Notes

[1] *Sanjher Pradip* (Light of the Dusk, 1955), for example.

[2] *Pothe Holo Deri* (The Delayed Journey, 1957) is a good example.

[3] For example, *Harano Sur* (The Lost Tune, 1959) and *Indrani* (The Egoist, 1958) with Suchitra Sen and *Joutuk* (The Dowry, 1958) with Sumitra Debi.

[4] Some of them were *Upohar* (The Gift, 1955); *Saheb Bibi Golam* (King, Queen and Knave, 1956), *Bordidi* (The Elder Sister, 1957), *Dactarbabu* (The Physician, 1958), *Manmoyee Girls' School* (Scandal in a School, 1958), *Bicharok* (The Judge, 1959); *Morutirtha Hinglaj* (The Desert Pilgrimage, 1959) *Khokababur Prottyaborton* (The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1960).

[5] *Saptapadi* (The Seven Steps, 1961), *Shiulibari* (The Townmaker, 1962), *Sesh Onko* (The Final Act 1963) *Kanna* (The Cry, 1962); *Lal Pathor* (The Red Stone, 1964), *Thana Theke Aschi* (The Inspector Calls, 1965), *Kal Tumi Aleya* (The Negotiator, 1966) *Jotugriha* (The House of Wax, 1964) *Chowringhee* (1968) are some of them. Satyajit Ray's Byomkesh Bakshi whodunit *Chiriyakhana* (The Zoo) and the cross cultural musical *Anthony Firingee* (The Poet from a Foreign Land), both made in 1967, won him the inaugural national award for best actor.

[6] See Pico Iyer, 'Satyajit Ray's 'The Hero' Revisited', NYRB, February 27, 2018,

[7] Such as *Jodubongsho* (The Parricide), *Nagor Dorpone* (In the Mirror of the City), *Agniswar* (Lord of the Fire) and *Baghbondi Khela* (The Hunting Game), all of them made in 1974/75.

[8] Richard Dyer, *Stars*, British Film Institute, London, 1998.

[9] Christine Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London: Routledge, 1991; pg XI.

[10] Jacqueline Rose, The Cult of Celebrity, London Review of Books, 20:16, August 20, 1998.