

THE ENIGMA OF AN ARRIVAL

by SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY

In 1951, a cartoon - *Bengal's Hero* appeared in the satirical periodical *Achalpotro*. The cartoon showed a waddling baby with the face of a struggling actor, who was seen holding within his embrace the neck of his much-older beloved, and uttering, with saccharine smugness, 'Dear, do you love me?' The baby's face was that of Uttam Kumar, about 25 at that time.

In 1951, Uttam was working as a clerk at a Calcutta Port office and was moonlighting as a straggler in the cinema industry. He was found wanting in credentials of pedigreed rearing, training or exposure to good education. His films came a cropper not least because, as the cartoon hinted, he appeared awfully amateur next to established female actors. Rebuffs, sneers and snubs were not new to the raw-boned actor. But the cartoon not only made fun of his debacles, it infantilized him, hinting at the Oedipal nature of his misplaced drive to be a leading man of celluloid. It was the unkindest cut of all.

Now, let us consider Satyajit Ray's views on Uttam Kumar [1]: "I was not a film-maker yet when I first saw Uttam on the screen. I had heard of the emergence of the new hero and was curious to see what he was like. The heroes that one saw on the Bengali screen those days - Durgadas Banerjee, Pramathes Barua, K.L. Saigal, Dhiraj Bhattacharya - were hardly in the same league with the Hollywood heroes one admired. I saw three of Uttam's films in a row, all made by one of our ablest directors, Nirmal Dey. First impressions were certainly good. Uttam had good looks, a certain presence, an ease of manner, and no trace of the theatre in his performance. He, obviously, had a future".

These two observations refer to roughly the same period in Kumar's life. But they stand on opposite ends, because they are symptomatic of how differently one would see his early trajectory. For the old guard, Uttam was an annoyance, displaying ambitions of being heir to a vaunted succession of screen icons. For those like Ray, his effortless performative style signified a needful shift in the culture of cinema. The two views also represent two ways of mapping Bengali cinema's moment of mutation. For the old guard, Bengali cinema of the 1950s was a continuation of its hoary studio days; for the new radicals, there was no continuity possible after Partition. If Uttam signified a diminution of a tradition for one, for the other he represented a historically necessitated moment of a beginning.

What was undeniable was that the succession of catastrophes that ran through the 1940s had touched every part of Bengal generally and Calcutta in particular. Cinema was no exception. The formidable pre-Partition economy and sphere of influence that constituted the base of that cinema were now dissolved, having precipitated a financial and territorial crisis. The safe anchor of the studios were gone, alongwith the dead weight of salaried actors and crew, controlled screens, studio-enabled scenography, a culturally identifiable viewership and a choreographed pattern in performative expressions. Paucity of young talent, ageing of leading performers, and a discernible sense of falling into a cultural tedium cloyed it further. In short, there could not have been a more fraught time than the end of the 1940s, when Uttam appeared on the screen. Ironically, in a few years Uttam's rise not only triggered Bengali popular cinema's bold re-negotiation of its own limits, it also produced Bengal's most iconic screen persona.

But this phenomenon did not take place overnight. Apart from his modest good looks and admirable tenacity, Uttam could only bring to his salad days a keen yearning for barefoot edification. He learned on the job, kept his eyes open to everyday behavioral minutiae and made himself amenable to anyone who had a word of advice. He familiarized himself with Hollywood stardom and screen protocols of mid-century melodrama, thanks to his projectionist father at Metro Cinema. He also made the best use of fortuity that came his way in the form of chances that were offered to him, his repeated failures notwithstanding. The unreleased *Mayador* (The Embrace of Affection, 1947) did little for him but the next six released films, over four years (1948-51) did nothing either, except, as Uttam mentions in part-autobiography, drawing out of him a petulant sigh at the end of a tiresome day, the all too familiar response of a sophomore performing aspirant.

Slowly and arduously, he managed a jubilation or two in the form of *Bosu Poribar* (The Basu Family, 1952) and *Sare Chuattor* (The Secret Insignia, 1953). As he started to gain public acceptability, he brought significant changes to the idea of the leading man. From his early days, he could solicit the audience's gaze, govern the camera's eye and regulate the movement of a scene. From a callow, untrained straggler, Uttam also reconstructed the actor in himself, with a keen sensibility about affective codes of celluloid, the limits of cinematic form, the visual agency of a protagonist, and the endless possibilities of non-stylised, natural performance. In a final nod to this new figuration of the screen hero, he was advised to make better use of his smile and as is evident ever since, he more than obliged.

In 1954, the sentimental melodrama *Agniparikha* (Trial by Fire) gave him the stellar push. A precocious laggard of about twenty films by then, Uttam became a star almost overnight. Between 1954 and 1957, a string of humongous box office successes [2] blurred the ignominy of his immediate past and made him a transcendental cinematic attraction. Taking 1954 as key, it is customary to associate Uttam's rise to stardom with the ragingly successful romantic melodramas (most prominently with Suchitra Sen but not exclusively). And this standard narrative was credited for his transformation into an unparalleled matinee idol. His romantic films doubtless helped bring a sense of belonging, distinctive style, safety of an anchor, and a humanist prospect to popular cinema.

What is less evident is how Uttam was simultaneously partisan to a series of realistic social dramas, Partition parables, city chronicles, and astute character studies. [3] This not only expanded the tone and tenor of his screen persona but also made popular cinema an equal stakeholder in the cultural zeitgeist, a role usually reserved for art cinema. In and through such roles Uttam imported a discernible contemporaneity, intelligence and insight that was of its own making. Coupled with its other new-found strengths, Uttam's rise acted as the desired catalyst and the fledgling *new* Bengali popular cinema was firmly put on the road to unprecedented heights.

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Notes

[1] *Satyajit Ray on Cinema*, (Ed) Sandip Ray; Columbia University Press, NY et al, 2013, p 107-108.

[2] Some notable ones would include *Sobar Opore* (Final Truth, 1955), *Shapmochon* (The Breaking of a Curse, 1955), *Sagarika* (Call of the Sea, 1956), *Ekti Raat* (One Night, 1956), *Shankar Narayan Bank* (A Banking Scandal, 1956), *Chirokumar Sabha* (Bachelor's Club, 1956), *Pothe Holo Deri* (The Delayed Journey, 1957), *Harano Sur* (The Lost Tune, 1957), *Indrani* (The Egoist, 1958), *Joutuk* (The Dowry, 1958).

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