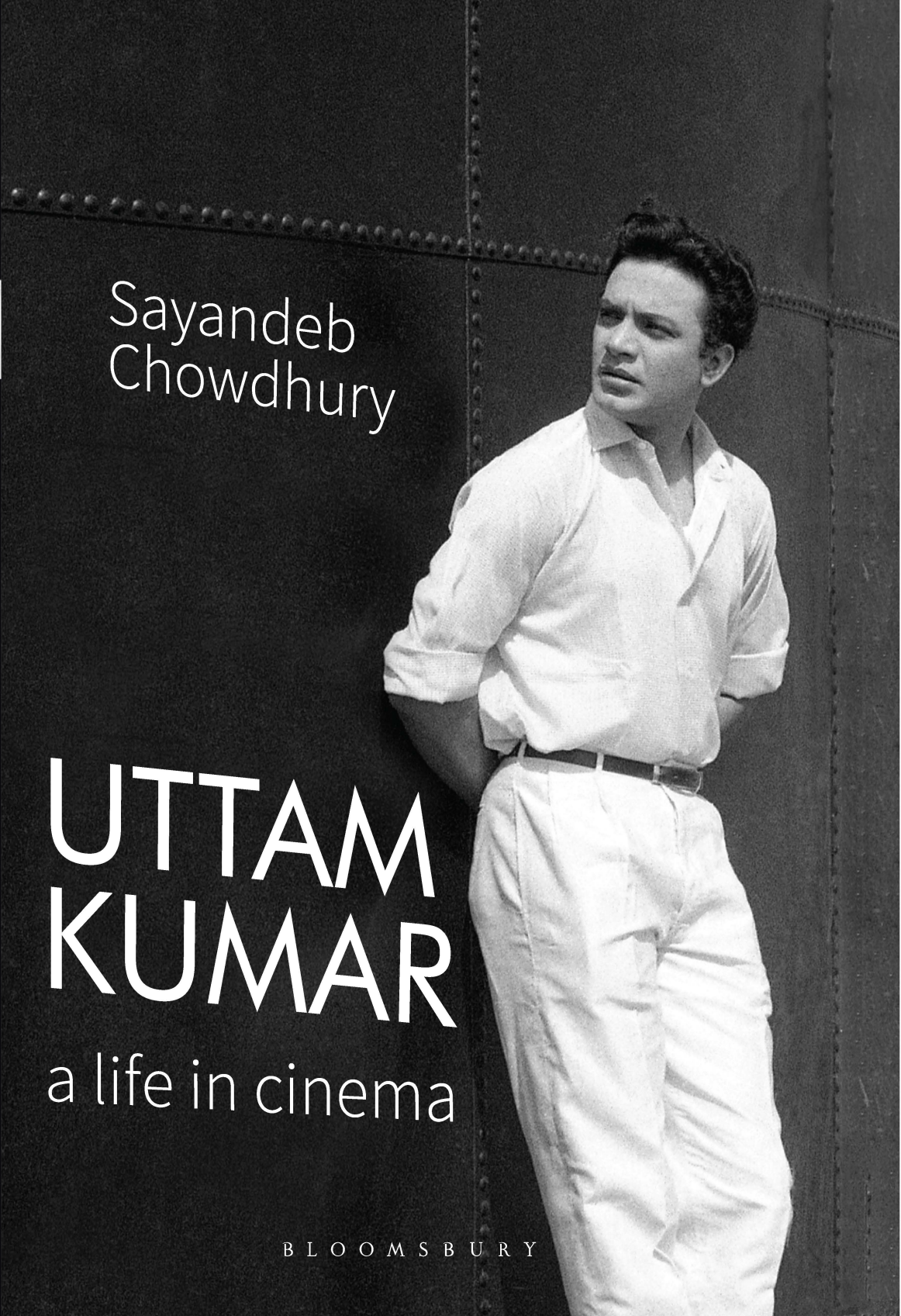
Sayandeb
Chowdhury
UTTAM
KUMAR
a life in cinema
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A LIFE IN CINEMA

Sayandeb Chowdhury

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NEW DELHI • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY INDIA
Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd
Second Floor, LSC Building No. 4, DDA Complex, Pocket C – 6 & 7,
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, 110070

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First published in India 2021
This edition published 2021

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

ISBN: HB: 978-93-90358-85-4 ; eBook: 978-93-90358-01-4
ePDF: 978-93-54352-71-3

Typeset in Minion Pro by Manipal Technologies Limited

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To the everlasting charms of a unique film star,
the heroic laughter behind that stardom,
and the genial man behind that laughter.

The universe has its only language of gesture,
It talks in the voice of pictures and dance.
—Rabindranath Tagore, *On Art and Aesthetics*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

UTTAM Kumar is a public obsession in Bengal. He coaxes a mix of ebullience and awe from everyone who I have had the occasion of mentioning the book. Moreover, stardom is a slippery idea. I have taken rounds around it, meeting people from various walks who have made it even more elusive. So, my gratitude and exasperation is wide and all-encompassing.

It was in 2004 that I first thought of a project of this nature and have since hung on to it, albeit piecemeal. Personal and professional vacillations aside, the delay is also because I could barely manage to hoard anything more than a steady supply of eagerness. Actual work began only in 2017. At the same time, I have realised—more to my relief than my disappointment—that everything has a time; and that the current shape, tone and temperament of the book would have been unachievable, if it were written even three years ago. Not that it is anything close to being perfect now, but it would have been much worse otherwise. Part of the reason is my own stake in it, which has consolidated over time; part of it because it was always an ambitious project needing research, reflection and reconnaissance in equal measure; and partly because a lot of material I have accessed became available only recently.

A first book carries the imprint of growing up into a kind of individuality and here I cannot miss mentioning my teachers in school, Amit Dasgupta and Rajat Bhattacharya. Unless they had taught me to be confident with a tongue not as native as it now seems, I would not have found the courage to make teaching literature a profession and this book the first public pronouncement of my having been betrothed to a language. The formidable scholars and the freethinking ecosystem at both the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and Jadavpur University, Kolkata, have also played a very enabling role during my university days.

I also owe it to my grandfather Jyotiprasad Banerjee, a professor at the University of Calcutta, for having made me attentive to history in a way a teenager should be, with pleasure and animation rather than with the pencilled sincerity of a textbook student. So did my grandmother Tripti, whose keen eye for history made her read about far-flung countries till well into her 70s. I have not studied either history or film as a professional undertaking. So, the errors here are my own and

the joys, if any, belong to such gentlemen and women to whose thirst for life I would want to be an heir. I miss them terribly.

In the same breath, I must mention Professor Moinak Biswas, who has long been a silent support for this project. Now my doctoral supervisor, he has allowed me to take away two years from my doctoral years to concentrate exclusively on the book. I am not sure any other advisor would have done the same. I profusely thank him to be able to secure temporary amnesty from the grinds of research. He also gave me permission to use images from the archive of the Media Lab at Jadavpur University.

My parents Saswati and Tapas have survived my many indecisions and errors, mostly because they hardly had a choice but also because they are extremely nice people. Both have also read various drafts of the chapters with all the parental indulgence they could muster. So has my sister Raina (Debdatta), who took the additional responsibility of keeping me warned about my ritual lapse into lethargy. Can't thank them enough.

Long-time friends Jagori Bandyopadhyay, Nayna Chatterjee, Baidik Bhattacharya and Mallarika Sinha Roy adjusted to my pesky habit of diverting any *adda* towards Uttam with all the kindness that befits helpless comrades. They have also doubled as readers of bits, having signed up for the ordeal under the threat that not one bad word was allowed about the star. Jagori deserves a special mention for also being a film critic of public standing. I have spent many evenings conversing with her, over phone or in person, about the direction the book might be taking. I am especially thankful to her. I am also extremely thankful to Mousumi Dasgupta and Rajendran Narayanan, dear friends and Uttam co-fans, who kept my writing life warm with their gung-ho vocality. So did Sarnath Banerjee, who often surprised me with his thoughtful curiosity about the fate of the book.

I also had readers in friends Rituparno Basu, Arpita Kuila and Anshuman Chakraborty. I have had meaningful conversations with friends Rajat Sur, Sangbida Lahiri, Sandeep Banerjee and Atreyee Majumdar, Gautam Basuthakur, Sreshtha and Abhijit Banerjee, and passingly, with several others—cousins, colleagues, kin. Friends Supriyo Ghosh and Sanjukta Roy, Ishita Dey, Sanjeet Chowdhury, Anirban Biswas, Abeer Gupta, Anirban Das, Kalyan S., Shilpi Goswami, and my oldest buddies Anirban Banerjee and Shamik Chatterjee have played invigorating parts in this saga. I am thankful to Kaushik Bhowmik, a historian of cinema, for copiously advising me on an early draft of a chapter. Nilanjan Dasgupta, Sudipta Mitra, Amitav Sen, Amitabha Bhattacharya, Debashish Mukhopadhyay, Shantanu Chatterjee, Subhojit Chatterjee, Anurag Samuel, Sunalini Kumar and especially

Vikram Thakur have been very supportive of the project. So was Zehra Mehdi, who was almost convinced of Uttam's greatness before she escaped to the United States. This book would have had a longer gestation period unless film writer and editor Shantanu Roychowdhury had nudged or friend and former publisher Saugata Mukherjee hadn't prodded. In recent years, I have had the privilege of the warm company of Professor Shyam B. Menon, Professor Alok Bhalla and Professor Salil Mishra, who have taught me a lot. I have also received earnest support from a younger collective of cinema enthusiasts who have read my occasional pieces on Uttam over the years and kept me going with their kind appreciation. If I am guilty of forgetting anyone here, it is thanks to an unreliable narrator housed in my brain.

I have had the opportunity to write three longish essays on Uttam. I am grateful to former arts editor at *Caravan Magazine* Snigdha Poonam, *Film International* editor Daniel Lindvall and *The Wire*'s Sidharth Bhatia for making their publication possible. Writing two academic essays were also part of my preparation for the book. For one of them I thank scholars Madhuja Mukherjee and Kaustav Bakshi—who invited me to contribute to a special issue of the Routledge journal *South Asian History and Culture*. The other essay received the keen attention of Professor Stephanos Stephanides, who, along with Professor G.J.V. Prasad, edited an issue on Partition for Routledge's *European Journal of English Studies*. I am also thankful to opinion editors at *The Hindu* and *Anandabazar Patrika* for publishing two recent pieces by me on Uttam; and to Gayatri Sinha and her team for inviting me to write a two-part essay on Uttam for *Critical Collective*—a learned digital resource and journal.

Among all the professional help I received, I must mention the owners of Angel Video, who have made many hitherto unavailable films accessible on YouTube. I do not know them but I am nevertheless very grateful to them. I must mention Shaktidas Roy, under whose eminent supervision the library at the *Anandabazar Patrika* thrives, as well as Professor Amlan Dasgupta, who gave me access to Jadavpur University's School of Cultural Texts and Records. With over 1,400 booklets, the Rudrajit Mookherjee Collection of Cinema and Theatre Booklets (1932–2005) at the British Library is a wonderland of popular cinema publicity. Gopal Biswas and Chandranath Chattopadhyay, reputed collectors and keen custodians of intangible film heritage, informed and listened equally. They also introduced me to ace collector Parimal Ray, whose lavish reproduction of Uttam Kumar's posters were a ready reckoner. He also gave me permission to use the bulk of the images in I have included in the book. Sandip Ray, son of Satyajit Ray, gave me permission to use one image. And I cannot miss mentioning

Suranjan Roy, who fleshed out a most exclusive image from his late father Sukumar Roy's collection for use on the cover. My immense gratitude to all of them.

I also very thankful to Mr Satchin of India Habitat Centre in New Delhi for inviting me to speak at the Habitat Film Appreciation Forum in August 2018; and to Professor Awadhendra Sharan of the Centre for Developing Societies, Delhi, for hosting a talk on the idea of the book on a rainy evening in March 2020, days before the world stopped on its tracks.

I am in debt of my old friend Pinaki De for his help in procuring some images and his most gracious and creative contribution to the design of the book. Without him, the cover would not have looked half as good as it does.

Publishers Bloomsbury and particularly Chandra Sekhar have earned my highest regard due to the alacrity and professionalism with which he proceeded with the book from the days when a nervous manuscript was aspiring to become a monograph. This book would have wallowed in uncertainty had not Chandra stepped in and given it the shape it now has. My deepest gratitude is to him, to Editorial Manager Shreya Chakraborti, the editorial board at Bloomsbury and to the anonymous peer reviewer who bowled me over with his/her endearing feedback.

Finally, in the later years of the making of the book, Nupur Samuel has been a steady source of fortitude, counsel and endearment in equal measure. I owe a lot to her natural scepticism about the ways of the world.

This is the first definitive book on the life and cinema of Uttam Kumar, or so is what I have conceived it as. If it finds success, I would owe it to Uttam's endless spell, which would have then extended from the lighted screen to the book. If the book fails, it is my doing entirely.

New Delhi
January 2021

A NOTE, OR TWO, ON THE BOOK

UTTAM Kumar would have been ninety-five this year if he lived. He died forty-one years ago, having lived a life much larger than most. And yet, there is little readable literature on Uttam Kumar's life and work beyond the yearly supply of brief cultural reporting. Recollections, anecdotes, gossip—often hagiographic—are repeated ad nauseam in Bengali; but there is little to no assessment, or interrogation, or engagement. There is not one definitive biography in Bengali and barely a book or two in English.

The question is, why?

For years, serious cinema or only those demonstratively inviting in critical attention were taken up for 'studies'. Gradually, critical attention grew to include popular cinema too. In recent years, Bombay (now Mumbai) as a site of silent and studio cinema and Bollywood—as a protean term of cultural and economic transportability—has attracted insightful studies, using materialist, space, reception and even affect theory. But work on vernacular cinema remains pitifully less. Even within that small number, studies by formidable scholars on Tamil, Telugu and Kannada cinema have tapped into the complex network of cinema-meets-politics-meets-mythology. Bengali cinema has remained comparatively untapped. Even when Bengali film scholarship crawled outside the sovereignty of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak or Mrinal Sen, it has occupied itself with early cinema—an engagement that has recently produced rather good work. But still, not much on Uttam. Has the star's glaring ubiquity deterred serious studies?

There are just three books in English on Uttam. Nipabithi Ghosh's *Uttam Kumar: The Ultimate Hero* is a bare-bones biography. Veteran film critic Swapan Mullik's *Mahanayak Revisited* is a quickly rendered review of Uttam's work with five of his co-actors, with an additional chapter on Uttam and Ray. The book is less about Uttam than about Mr Mullick's misgivings about popular cinema. The last, Maitreyee Chowdhury's *Bengali Cinema's First Couple* is a gushing homage to Uttam and Suchitra Sen. These works provide scant insight into Uttam beyond what is known. Sharmistha Gooptu's *Bengali Cinema: An Other Nation* is notable, but covers much wider ground than just Uttam or his cinema. So, there continues to be precious little on Uttam in the learned circles: his range of style and performance; the attractions and problems of his cinema; his roles as director, actor and producer; or his persona, stardom, and talismanic legacy.

To encompass the range and scale of Uttam's standing and stardom, adoration and impact, a cultural biography of Uttam Kumar's cinema seems fitting. An abecedarian biography—the necessary framing of life–work–death progression of an actor—runs the danger of underestimating his reach beyond his orbit; while an iconography will overestimate them. This book embodies both these endowments, and abandons them equally. Moreover, this book tracks the moving image in Bengal for almost a century, of which three decades and over 100 films receive close attention. To that end, the book eschews any constricted film theory that would consign cinema practice to pattern. Moreover, one cannot talk about any one set of films in Uttam's oeuvre without taking into account a complex screen persona and the contextual basis of a unique stardom.

Hence, the book moves through a series of queries that are spread, in no necessary order, across the span of the subject. What exactly accounts for Uttam's undying popularity? How could Uttam be a product of a quicksilver world and yet so effortlessly be beyond its power of erasure? To what extent did his cinema typify the imagination of a community in a postcolonial state that was under tremendous social, ethical and historical flux? To what extent did his cinema embody its people, who were mutating with mordant anger at one moment and waiting with cultured hope the next? Is Uttam's cinema a template of collective aspiration or an escape from it? Did his stardom hurt Bengali cinema's intellectual ambitions or did it add to it? How could he give himself such a long afterlife? Is Uttam's stardom a major asset for Bengali cinema or was it, in the final assessment, a massive liability? To answer these questions, the book, among other things, tries to engage meaningfully with Uttam's life, harps back to his cultural importance as 'matinee idol' and pushes forth the social and cultural figuration in his cinema.

With Uttam as the chief protagonist, this book tells the story of Bengali cinema between the 1950s and 1970s, with a galloping run-up to those decades, adding in the end a comprehensive enquiry into the legacy that Uttam has left behind. If the book foregrounds anything, it is a robust discussion of his films, which is unfortunately, a rarity. I have also tried to bring into focus his early and lost films, material about which has been collated from public and personal archives. Of similar import are the small voices of the industry, who have kept the memory of Uttam alive but hardly find mention otherwise. To realise these intentions, the book abandons an exclusive academic template to include anecdotal prattle, industry chatter, urban legends, incipient filmy folklore and so on, because those are important channels of appreciation, appraisal and comprehension of a star figure. At the same time, the book stays clear of flippant gossip about Uttam's personal life,

this being a matter of endless speculation and drawing-room chatter for decades, which, I think, should be left there.

The primary conceptual aim of the book is to be able to encompass the importance of the *figure*—to try to locate a celluloid life within a larger historical, political and cultural context. A complimentary métier of the book was to explore why and how a star-persona could reconstitute the bhadralok Bengali visual cultural world in the post-Partition period. The book hence resolutely stays within the domain of cultural history and star studies. This approach, I hope, would not only reveal the star, hero and actor from various competing vantages and claims of having embodied symptoms of the public imagination; but also show how a towering image could be mobilised for an ever-greater pursuit of wholesome, popular, sometimes even radical, progressive entertainment.

But this kind of study is far from easy. Among the basic problems is the proliferation of information on Uttam Kumar in countless magazines, periodicals and broadsheets which have penned down his *greatness*, without bothering to go beyond. They contain a dizzying cycle of repetition of his virtues and value as a star—garnered from colleagues and co-actors, directors, technicians, distributors and theatre-owners. Prima facie, one is bound to read them with fascination, wondering about the extent of Uttam's reach and how many lives he had directly been able to touch, if not also transform. There is, in fact, enough material to write a straightforward, quick and anecdotal biography if one puts together the existing literature, a good part of which comes from Uttam's own memoirs and one written by a friend. But the surplus of familiarity adds lapidary glitter to the bouquet of lore around a star; but the idea itself tends to remain elusive. A large part of my task was to write the book without being carried away by the volumes of homage to his name. As an author, one remains anxious about the possibility of having *too much* of a public figure as his subject of inquiry, not only because there is a good possibility of being overwhelmed by it but also because a subject much taller—in scope and scale—than the author's goal is likely to remain, in good measure, outside the author's reach. Moreover, in the din of laudatory testaments, one has to stay vigilant of the silences, gaps and lapses that simplistic evaluations often smoothen out, not to mention the heavy cross of being a singular, 'infallible' star that Uttam was compelled to bear for most of his working life.

If there is over-familiarity on one side, there is a profound lack of awareness the moment one steps outside the familiar demography; even among those who have kept a close watch over cinemas in India. Whatever little idea there is, it is limited to Uttam's sad retinue of films in Hindi. Even there, the comparatively better ones such

as *Dooriyan* or *Kitaab* are forgotten and a quick recall would lead to either the schmaltzy *Amanush* or the deplorable *Desh Premee*. No one even comprehends that some of Hindi cinema's milestones: *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (*Saheb Bibi Golam*), *Hum Dono* (*Uttarayan*), *Kala Pani* (*Sobar Opore*), *Hum Hindustani* (*Bosu Poribar*), *Lal Patthar* (*Lal Pathor*), *Angoor* (*Bhrantibilash*), *Jibanmrityu* (*Jibonmrityu*), *Chupke Chupke* (*Chhoddobeshi*), *Kati Patang* (*Surjotopa*), *Amar Prem* (*Nishipodmo*), *Anurodh* (*Deya Neya*), *Abhiman* (*Bilombito Loy*), *Bemisal* (*Ami, She O Shokha*) and *Ijaazat* (*Jotugriha*) were all remakes of Uttam's films. This is to say that at least nine of Hindi cinema's biggest names—Guru Dutt, Dev Anand, Sunil Dutt, Rajkumar, Sanjeev Kumar, Rajesh Khanna, Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan and even Naseeruddin Shah—have together brought to screen myriad characters which in their original belonged to just one actor. What this means is that Uttam Kumar, thanks to two Satyajit Ray films, is perhaps known much better among a global connoisseurship of cinephiles than he is known in all of India. That is a serious oversight.

A major task of this book was to be able to straddle these extremes of overwrought acquaintance and baffling unfamiliarity. It is through Uttam's body of work and his life *within* and *outside* it, that the book hopes to strike this balance between the persona, the figure and the cult of the star/actor. The extensive summation of such a figure and his world is the onus of 'A Heroic Laughter'. It is followed by 'Twenty-Four Frames of Fame', which invokes gripping, magical moments and testaments that make up the life, times, flamboyance and charm of Uttam Kumar, referring to cinema technology being 24 freeze-frames put into motion per second. 'The Big Picture' stretches out to the beginning of movie-making in India, to allow a mandatory retrospection that, in a thrilling tale of invention, suffering and one-upmanship, would invoke the deep historical context up to Uttam's arrival in the early 1950s. 'Flopmaster general', a term coined to mock Uttam's early foibles as a rookie actor, recounts the rebuffs the actor faced and how he managed to survive them to emerge into prominence. Uttam's stardom reshaped Hollywood-inspired popular melodramas into a specifically Bengali melodrama, producing a matinee idol and the romantic star for every reason and every season, which is what 'Hour of the Star' is about. 'Hard Times in Soft City' is about *the city* in Uttam's cinema—the long and under-appreciated association that his stardom and Calcutta has had with each other under conditions that were exerting themselves on the city as much they were on his films. 'To the Top, to the Top, to the Top' celebrates Uttam's best films, making it a laudatory testament to a fabled actor, idol and star; while 'A Gallery of Portraits' sequesters a series of films that broke away from either the grain of regular

romance or offered an interesting or unpredictable template for the star-protagonist. The penultimate chapter, 'Autumn of the Patriarch', interrogates the last years of his stardom, his increasing vulnerability to petitions of miserable, tasteless populism and the concomitant shifts in the cinematic narratives, cultural criterion and the overall polity of Bengal. Evidently, 'The Afterlife of the Bhadralok' is about Uttam's posthumous life, the affective relationship between his cinema and his reception as a quintessentially bhadralok icon; and the calibration of a legacy that increasingly exposes the singularity and starkness of a stardom that was in surplus of Bengal's cinema of containment.

TITLES AND PRONUNCIATION

Except a handful, there is hardly any translation of the titles of Uttam Kumar's films. This is not surprising because those who have ever bothered about them have come from the self-referential cultural sphere of the Bengali-speaking native. So, translation was not deemed necessary. The foremost aim of this book is to reach out to general cinema readership who may not have access to the language of Uttam's cinema. I have hence translated, however insufficiently, all the titles of the films I have discussed at some length. Movies of Uttam or otherwise that are referred to only in passing have been left alone. I hope that the translated titles (and the details thereof) invoke enough interest in the reader to further explore the films. Over the years, I have found a handful of translated titles floating in the blogosphere. Some of my final translations may carry those impressions, but there is no easy way to acknowledge that debt. If I have used any of them, I am grateful immensely. I must also point out that in case of multiple mentions of a film, I have provided the translated title only where it has received detailed attention. Elsewhere, I have mentioned only the Bengali title.

Any act of translation, even a phrase as brief as a movie title, involves complex cultural transportation. I have tried to take them into account. Few illustrations might show how. For example, some titles are familiar, like *Nayak* (The Hero); while some require straightforward translations: *Bicharok* (The Judge) and *Harano Sur* (The Lost Tune), for example. Some like *Pothe Holo Deri* (The Delayed Journey), *Sagorika* (The Call of the Sea), *Nishithe* (At the Dead of Night) or *Mayamriga* (The Red Herring) vary a little from the original, even if the word or phrase manages to carry sense of the title or the subject, or both. Some translations demand explanation. The literal translation of a well-known film like *Antony Firingee* would have been 'Antony the Foreigner'. But 'Firingee' was *not* a term denoting *the* colonial foreigner as the abhorred

other but is, in fact, and surely in this case, one of mixed endearment. Hence, I have used *The Poet from Another Land* to not overemphasise Antony's foreignness but only hint at it. In some cases, a name would not be enough. For example, a title like *Rajlakshi O Srikanto* would be familiar in Bengal for being household literary characters; but would not ring any bells for those outside the language. I have hence translated the title as *The Deviant and the Demi-monde* to hint what the characters, in reverse order of the original, 'stand' for. In a similar vein, I have translated *Morutirtho Hinglaj* as *The Desert Pilgrimage*, choosing to drop the place-name Hinglaj from the title since it is an unfamiliar destination as far as a typical pilgrim's progress is concerned. A similarly complex case is *Sharey Chuattor*, which I have translated as *The Secret Insignia* with adequate explanation. In all such cases I have tried to ensure that contexts are explained, so as not to lose anything in the act of making the translation comprehensive. Again, a title like *Jotugriha* (House of Wax) does not sound unfamiliar, because of the reference to *The Mahabharata*, unlike say *Jodubongsho*, which too has connotations in the epic, referring to a family that slaughters its own kin. The latter title has hence been translated as *The Parricide*. Another such example is *Kal Tumi Aleya*, whose literal English title would be 'The Mirage Called Time', a rather unpoetic phrase. Moreover, *kal* in Bengali has a wider spectrum of meanings than *time*. I have hence preferred *The Survivor* referring to the film's protagonist. As for, say, *Thana Theke Aschi*, which would become the unbefitting 'one who came from the police station', I have retained the title of the J.B. Priestley play *An Inspector Calls* from which the film was faithfully (and terrifically) adapted. Finally, I would have preferred 'The Menagerie' for Satyajit Ray's Byomkesh Bakshi whodunit *Chiriyakhana*. But Ray translated it as 'The Zoo', which is literal surely but not scrupulous to the collective of weird outlaws in the film. But it is too well known a title to tamper with.

It is for the same reason that I have retained the spelling of *Nayak* though in all other cases, I have used vowel 'o' for the corresponding sound in Bengali and not the customary 'a'. So, it is *Harano Sur* and not 'Harana Sur' and *Morutirtho Hinglaj* and not 'Marutirtha Hinglaj'. Only where the title *begins* with the Bengali sound 'o'—as in *Agniporikha* or *Sesh Anko*—I have kept the 'a' because it would be extremely odd otherwise.

1

A HEROIC LAUGHTER

Behold, I bring you the Superman!
—Friedrich Nietzsche

IT was an evening in May 1966. Satyajit Ray, world-feted director of the *Apu Trilogy* and *Charulata* among others, dialled up a number from his four-room, open-terraced 3, Lake Temple Road residence that swiftly passed Sarat Chatterjee Avenue, kissed the leafy Southern Avenue, ran headlong along Lansdowne Road, jumped A.J.C. Bose Road, snaked past Hungerford Street and on hitting Moira Street turned right, entering the second floor of a sprawling apartment, also on plot no. 3, a little more than five kilometres away. Uttam Kumar, Bengal's legendary matinee idol, took the call. "Uttam", Ray's baritone boomed from across the speaker of the rotary dial phone, "*Nayak* premieres tomorrow at Indira Cinema. I hope you will be there." "But Manikda, the press and public will be in attendance. Do you think I should go? There might be pandemonium", the star reasoned. "Uttam, don't forget it's a Satyajit Ray film. Please be there", Ray commanded. For a moment the lines fell silent, then they sprang to life again. "Sure, Manikda", came the reply.

Next day, the news was out quickly. By late afternoon, crowds thronged every bit of road leading to Bhawanipur, south Calcutta's movie haven. Parts of the city's southern neighbourhoods had to be barricaded. Accosted by the volatile crowd, Uttam Kumar's car, a Chevrolet Impala, had to abandon the usual route of three kilometres and was piloted through the by-lanes of Chakraberia and Beltala. As expected, the venue too was chock-a-block, with hundreds guarding the gates for one glimpse of the star. Uttam was cagey, though this kind of raucous fandom had greeted him on every such occasion for over a decade by then.

On reaching the gleaming, newly whitewashed Indira Cinema, Uttam Kumar disembarked sprightly, managing to escape the waiting hundreds and swiftly moved into the confines of the building. He was escorted to his seat inside the hall cloaked in complete darkness. But it was too late to conceal his presence. The cushy theatre was shaking under the weight

of uproarious greeting, 'Guru', 'Guru', with demands to see the star in person. Alarmed, the theatre manager rushed to Ray, already seated. "Sir, if we don't bring him up on stage there will be a serious law-and-order issue. Can I?" he asked. Ray nodded quietly. Minutes later, the lights came on and Uttam Kumar was seen standing on the raised platform in front of the screen. He raised his hand. The crowd fell silent, as if at the wave of a magic wand. Uttam looked straight ahead into the expectant eyes of a hundred restless heads seated in front. "I request you to please be silent and watch the film. Don't forget it is a Satyajit Ray film. Please."

This story, a piquant testimonial to two of Bengal's foremost immortals is partly apocryphal. But that takes nothing away from what this tale testifies to—Ray's sway over his cast, the plaint theatre manager; the affianced, vociferous crowd; and the phenomenal stardom of Uttam Kumar. In some ways, this tale, like the film that was premiering that day, encapsulates the fantasy that was Bengali cinema. And it is not Ray who *colonised* that cinema, either as fantasy or as commerce. It was Uttam Kumar. And only Uttam Kumar.

Image 1.1: Uttam near the Colosseum in Rome, 1966
(Photograph by Satyajit Ray)

Source: Ray archives.

There have been splendid actors such as Soumitra Chatterjee who have been feted internationally; there have been leading men such as Pramathesh Barua, who have defined a generation; there have been the

ablest of performers such as Chhabi Biswas, whose screen presence can hardly be bettered. But there was (rather is) one who is all of the above: a leading actor, an extraordinary performer, a commercial magnet, a star-persona, an industry behemoth and a Bengali cultural talisman. There is only one icon of Bengali cinema—with all its highs and lows, its reach and range, its potential and its waste included—and that is Uttam Kumar.

INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

One of the most recognisable verities of Bengali cinema is that Uttam's three-decade career lorded way above others, whether as actor or as star. What is less understood is how we infused his star-making charisma with the ebullient charm of a Cary Grant romance; the keen intelligence of a Humphrey Bogart whodunnit; or the lyrical vulnerability of a Marcello Mastroianni masterwork. And somewhere in between crept in the debonair infallibility of a Gregory Peck; or the alluring magnetism of a Gary Cooper. And every bit of this Hollywood transfusion was layered with affable, dependable, recognisable screen etiquette and a dulcet bhadralok distinctiveness. This was an irresistible combination and irreproducible with anyone else. Moreover, Atlas-like Uttam carried the industry on his shoulders and like Prometheus, gave it the fire of livelihood for three decades. In an industry famous for greasepaint plasticity, Uttam was a bloody original; in an art form full of conforming puppets, Uttam was an insurrectionist. He was no one's marionette, except that of cinema itself. If all this sounds a bit outlandish, then so be it, because the hero has no better bedfellow than the hyperbole.

And yet, in case of Uttam, none of this is hyperbole. Uttam was indeed a star in the textbook sense, commanding and steering an entire popular industry and dominating its commercial and cultural assets between the early 1950s and late 1970s. Uttam was an informal and personal idol and at the same time a distant and collective cultural icon, soliciting fandom, affection, admiration and undying loyalty to his person and persona. He was not a product of the studio era and embodied the star era all by himself, over 200 films, about half of which remain re-collectible in Bengali cultural memory.

Let me illustrate this further. It has been almost seven decades since Uttam was first hailed as a figure of public adulation and four decades since Uttam Kumar passed away. Four long decades! We are in a world radically different from the one in which Uttam was born, attained

his stardom and died. Over these seven decades, the life of a citizen of Bengal (or those with broader links with it) have passed through an alarming parade of changes. Technologies of belonging, climates and culture, objects and trinkets, manners and morals, moments and minutia—every other thing that constitutes the theatre of life—have passed into the graveyard of history. As it should be.

Among the handful who have managed to parry the bulldozing effects of time is Uttam. He seems undying, un-ageing, untouched by history, uncorrupted by the clock. His cult is of a rare variety, which not only shows no sign of abatement but has, in fact, increased incrementally since his death in 1980. To that end, Uttam's star persona has managed to attain a distinguished afterlife; having included, over the years of television, a new generation of viewers with all their baggage of new cultural tastes. His cinema continues to draw weight, the umpteen re-runs of his films find a regular audience, his life and work is a perennial topic in *addas*, his departure publicly and secretly mourned. Moreover, Uttam's birth and death anniversaries are still a Bengali annual cultural event—coercing supplements from broadsheets and periodicals; a retrospective or two; television broadcasts of key films; vague seminars and talks; and mostly other sundry acts of remembrance. His name is still a magnet for mass mobilisation used at will for unctuous political ends, as any observer of Bengal would know.

This is the labourious part of it. Uttam Kumar, every now and then, also emerges in spontaneous outbursts of memorialisation, continuing to live outside the bombast of official commemoration. His posthumous home is in fact in the archetypal reminiscence of the quintessential Bengali subject—his effortless omnipresence finding its way into personal memoirs, nostalgic ruminations and casual revisits. In quickly disappearing parlours of single-screen theatres across the city he seems to be ubiquitous. That's expected. But Uttam's smiling portrait also peeps out from sudden nooks and corners—neighbourly salons, dusty tailor-shops, bare-boned photo-studios, rusty sweetshops and grimy eateries—they either in thrall of his everlasting charm or inevitably peddling his visit in their midst many moons ago. The scale of Uttam's easy visibility across Calcutta and towns of Bengal four decades after his death remains a startling case of fandom. The extent of appreciation of his cinema per se among those who deck up their surroundings with the likeness of him, however, remains a conjecture. Much more difficult is to gauge which Uttam this image refers to: the man, the actor, the star or the *undying* icon.

A finale of this fascination with the star is to be found in a series of portraits of Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray and Uttam Kumar lined one after the other in a meaningful sequence among poster

shops and picture-framing vendors squatting across Calcutta's embattled footpaths. This may be an inexplicable, even revolting, assortment for the bona fide Bengali intellectual but this coexistence carries within it a poignant metaphor of the city's unforgettable relationship with the star.

That metaphor is about the inscrutable nature of stardom. In his memoirs, Uttam, then already a star, recalls being huddled into a train compartment from his car at the Howrah Station while on his way to an outdoor shoot. As usual, he waited anxiously, hoping for the train to depart as soon as possible, before there was inevitable chaos. While waiting, he saw a man peeking into his coupe inquiring if Uttam Kumar would be around. Before Uttam could say anything, the man restlessly passed on. He did not return and the train left the terminus. Minutes later another man, portly and affectionate, walked smilingly into Uttam's cabin.

> A young man was scouting for you. He came to our cabin and asked if Uttam Kumar was around. I stood up and said I was Uttam Kumar. He was very pleased and told me he was a big fan of Uttam Kumar but he did not know how he looked and when he heard that the star may be on this train, he was desperate to find him and seek his blessings. So this man took my blessing and walked out rather pleased, having finally *met* his idol whom he had never seen. He did not speak Bangla so he did not see your films but was yet a great fan.[1]

Uttam had only smiled in reply.

This 'fan', whose relationship to his idol is merely in the realm of imagination rather than visibility—something extraordinary for a film star—perhaps captures the apparently baffling assortment of Tagore, Ray and Uttam. It is not in the domain of comparative artistic greatness that one must measure this assortment, but in the individual cultural imagination—separately but powerfully embossed—that one must recall the unmistakable presence of Uttam Kumar in the cultural life of Bengal. In other words, if Tagore signifies a giant who roamed the world of letters and Ray a gifted life in world cinema, Uttam Kumar is the popular 'hero' for all time, the memorable, monumental, in fact, *mythical* matinee idol.

A STORIED LIFE

Uttam Kumar, born in his north Calcutta maternal home at Ahiritola on 3 September 1926 as Arunkumar Chattopadhyay, made a slippery

acting debut in an unreleased Hindi film in 1947 and worked ceaselessly for over three decades till a July day in 1980 when he suffered another cardiac arrest on a movie set and passed away the day after.

A clerk at Calcutta Port Commissioners for several years, Uttam's early days in his vocation were full of disappointment and dejection. As he found some work, he restlessly juggled his day job with his fervent moonlighting for studio assignments. His success came slow, often coercing out of him a petulant sigh, an all-too familiar outburst of a sophomore performing aspirant, who could not stake his job at the altar of his fledgling infatuation. He had stayed put, however, working the ledgers during the day and making rounds of the studios in his free hours.

The established templates of Bengali male stardom and screen masculinity were drawn from the high tables set up by Durgadas Banerji, Pramathesh Barua and Chhabi Biswas, all of who were, to quote Hamlet, 'of the manner born'. They were rich, came from the local aristocracy, were professional by choice and romantic by disposition. Uttam was from a very modest, middle-class family, of ordinary schooling and a sketchy undergraduate education. Thinly built and emaciated, with a crop of oiled back-brushed hair, thick lips, a stout nose and small, curious eyes, the raw-boned Arun was lacking not just in degrees and rearing but also, in 'heroic' looks. So, when he at all got a chance to be in front of the camera, it was thanks mostly to the imploring of friends and relatives with connections in the industry. Otherwise, he had a hard time.

A year into the birth of the new Indian state, in 1948, Uttam did manage to make his first appearance on celluloid, but the film, *Drishtidan*, was forgotten. On the sets of films like *Kamona*, *Morjada*, *Ore Jatri* the nervous, emasculated, unobtrusive Uttam was an object of ridicule, taunted and teased by hangers-on in the studios. He soldiered on nervously, braving the roomful of cocky, loud naysayers. His first few films failed to draw any significant attention to his under-confident roles, whether as a side or lead actor, or to cause any box-office ripples. It was almost certain that Uttam was going to eke out a living out of the grinds of his lowly job or find inconsequential employment as a failed actor. Behind his back, they called him a 'flopmaster general'; to his face they reminded him of the pedigree of his predecessors and the inadequacy of his aspiration. There was none to handhold him, none to supervise his talents or unleash his energies. A gawky Uttam continued to lap up the roles he got, improved upon his borderline stammering, read voraciously and trained himself in soccer, swimming, wrestling and music. And his films continued to come a cropper. Till the early 1950s, then, the

dream of being a phenomenally popular matinee idol was not remotely in the reckoning, an unprecedented stardom not even a fanciful idea, nor did he imagine that one day he would be Ray's protagonist and walk the red carpet at the Berlin Film Festival.

But the plot changed pattern since the time he found commercial success with *Bosu Poribar* (1952) and *Sharey Chuattor* (1953), the latter launching his fabled pairing with Suchitra Sen. Then, in 1954, a teary melodrama called *Agniporikha* gave him the stellar push. A precocious straggler of about twenty movies by then, Uttam, almost overnight, became a star. Between 1954 and 1957, a string of humongous box-office successes blurred the hardship and ignominy of his past and made him a cinematic attraction. His apparently average looks became a magnet of affection, his gait of imitation, his manners of romance, his smile of idolatry. Sometime in the winter of 1954, months before Ray's *Panther Panchali* stormed the silos of the Western cinephile, a starry celluloid life premiered around the Tollygunge studios of Calcutta.

Uttam Kumar had a miraculous run at the box office for two full decades after he attained stardom. And the popularity he attained, both off and on the screen, is a stuff of lore. As he entered his mid-30s, he made efforts, not always with success, to be comparatively selective with his films, trying roles that suited his age and the temperament of the time. He also produced, directed, scored music and in one film, lent his mellifluous voice to his character. He found an actors' union, endlessly petitioned for development of film infrastructure, funded both popular and crossover films, raised aid for the poor and the unsecured foot soldiers of his fraternity and was the loudest voice of concern in service of the industry that nurtured him.

Uttam's acting fetched him laurels, awards (the first national award for acting to a male performer, six Bengal Film Journalists Association [BFJA] awards, commendations at Berlinale) and a huge and phenomenal fan following that pulverised both his privacy and person, put to interrogation his closely held middle-class upbringing and stalked his free movements till his last day. Given his sway, popularity and posthumous fame, it would be an act of underestimation to call Uttam just another star who reigned during his lifetime and continued to be an attraction after. Rather, for close to *three* decades, the cinematic materiality and imagination of Bengalis—culturally arrogant and historically zealous—were transported almost entirely upon the actor and his repertoire. Like the great acts that made him the iconic actor that he was, Uttam, at 5 feet and 11 inches, also stood much taller in death; whose purported shadow grew bigger and bigger with each passing day. Now, forty years into his afterlife, Uttam Kumar remains what he died as: the greatest icon ever to have graced Bengali cinema

and also one among the principal cultural protagonists of the entire post-Tagorean Bengali public life.

Very few, one can argue, would have been able to fulfil this role of a cultural sovereign for so long; and that too with the limited armoury of popular cinema. How did Uttam manage to? One needs to map Uttam's tremendous tenacity, diligence, charm and of course superlative talent; which were no doubt critical actors in making the star he was. One can also, no doubt, underline that Uttam's stardom was at the cusp of collective aspiration, private fantasy and commercial custodianship. His is also a most curious case of an incremental felicity of posthumous value; a case that must be looked at with as much interest as the calibration that goes into celebrating his cinema. But this prolonged hold over popular imagination cannot be reduced to a prosthetic cultural causality. Rather, we must understand that what Uttam brought to Bengali cinema was more than the sum of the parts that constituted him or his body of work. This *gestalt* and its exceptional legacy remains colossal; his case continuing to intrigue any observer of cinema. To that end, the story of Uttam not only forces us to enquire into the unquantifiable genus called stardom but also think anew the riches of cinema in Bengal itself.

In short, from a clerk to an actor, from an actor to a star, from a star to an icon, from an icon to a screen legend—this is a story that must be told.

CINEMA VARIÉTÉ

Uttam's intuitive proficiency as an actor sits uneasy on his proclivity towards signing films left, right and centre. Anything above 200 films in a working life of three decades is a daunting number, considering that except a handful, he was the protagonist in *all* of them. To be more precise, Uttam had 197 Bengali releases; six more films released posthumously. Then, there were twelve Hindi films, including the first unreleased film and the bilingual ones, of which seven had been released in his lifetime. Seven more, across two languages, were either in pre-production or on the floors when he passed away; while he was in advanced talks to be part of about nine more. So, when we are talking about Uttam Kumar, we are talking no less than 230 films. Even accounting for the sparse pre-stardom period and counting only those movies he managed to complete, it comes to an average of over six films annually for thirty-two years. In actual terms, they averaged much more during his peak. Since this is a staggering output, it is neither possible

nor advisable to touch upon every film. In fact, a significant share of the roster of the last five years, both in Bengali and Hindi, is in the rank of being avoidable. But even without them, one has to choose wisely from the large output of Bengali films till 1975, which numbers 166; with an additional film called *Nokol Shona* (False Glitter, 1974), where he played a cameo as himself. But why 1975? That would be clear in a while.

The most likely classification of his cinema would have been on a temporal scale: to divide his working life into three phases. In that case, the first, 1954 to 1961, would be considered the high-noon of romance; the second, 1962 to 1969, would be his peak as an actor; and the final one, 1970 to 1975, would be the years that marked a conspicuous, even if only comparative, decline. But such a division runs the risk of turning a frenetic body of work into methodical platitude, making a forceful case for a progressive pattern as essential to a retrospective analysis. Another possible division would have been as per film genres. Here, the populist catalogue would put the black and white romance at the top, followed by other, even if tenuous, generic heads, for example, 'period films' (*Saheb Bibi Golam*, *Chondranath*, *Jhinder Bondi*), 'thrillers' (*Khelaghor*, *Jibonmrityu, Kokhono Megh*), 'comedies' (*Haat Baralei Bondhu*, *Bhrantibilash*, *Chhoddobeshi*), 'social crisis films' (*Anupoma*, *Annapurnar Mondir, Ekhane Pinjor*) and so on. This division was a teasing proposition but a strict genre-approach is essentially studio-centric. Since in Bengali cinema studios vanished with Uttam's rise, a division of his cinema based on genres would be deceptive. Though the genres were a legacy that his cinema inherited and often improved upon, to stick to it would be to reinforce a traditionalist method. Moreover, such 'classifications' do not help to unravel a story of stardom.

Why not, instead, understand his cinema on the basis of the evolution of the star-actor? Because an opulent, robust and contentious stardom is best revealed when it can be approached or interrogated from various, sometimes even warring, vantages.

Hence, the first would be the overarching romance melodramas. Since Uttam's rise to the summit of stardom is usually monitored through romance, it would be best to see them under one tent-pole. Nothing better reveals the populist reception of Uttam's screen persona than these films. Under this rubric, *Agniporikha* (1954), *Sobar Opore* (1955), *Sagorika* (1956), *Ekti Raat* (1956), *Indrani* (1958), *Chawa Pawa* (1959), *Agnisonskar* (1961), *Deya Neya* (1963) and *Nayika Songbad* (1967) are the usual favourites. One can add another four dozen films to this list, each playing with the many shades of the genre. In these films, Uttam could perfectly embody (to refer to the famous typology

of American sociologist Orrin Klapp) the romantic hero, the Good Joe, the Pin-Up and the unrelenting rebel and all of them, often, in a single role. Also, in much of this cinema, new interventions, from young and zealous men and women, resulting from the emergent codes of modernity were contesting the familial domains of privilege and patriarchy.

While remembering this dominant type of cinema, one must also note that even quite early on Uttam had signed on roles that required little screen romance or any prolonged heterosexual participation in bringing to fruition a pre-conjugal couple-hood, which is what would constitute a *romantic* film. Uttam's participation in *parts* other than *romance* were hence simultaneous and not successive to his having reached the summit as a romantic hero. This is not to say that his choices were always impeccable in either sort of films, but what is important is that marquee stardom *did not* throttle his eagerness to go beyond the jugular. So, Uttam periodically subverted the dominance of the romance form and continued to work on atypical films. Moreover, these apparent melodramas could well go beyond the echo chamber of romantic fulfilment and establish a dialogue with the world around. These films, broadly the 'melodrama of the metropolis', continued to thrive even after Uttam peaked in the romances. In fact, it was through the *star text* of Uttam that a transforming modern melodrama form found a *habitas* in postcolonial Calcutta—the latter having changed perceptively under the mark of a historically irreversible event like Partition. So, the star-figure abetted popular cinema to mobilise its own visual language and respond to the cultural and social zeitgeist of the 1950s and 1960s. *Sharey Chuattor*, *Ora Thake Odhare* (1954), *Saheb Bibi Golam* (1956), *Surjotoron* (1958), *Kanna* (1962), *Kal Tumi Aleya* (1966) and *Chowrongee* (1968) would be some of them.

One should hence unlearn the lore that romance films had exclusive domination over Uttam's early screen life. Like all mythologies, it is historically unfounded. This is because by late 1950s, Uttam was strongly signalling his move away from any overwhelming image of the youthful romantic hero that he may have accrued through the 1950s. In other words, between the early 1950s and early 1960s, Uttam's accentuating stardom helped the melodrama form, with its signature designs, to coalesce into a dependable commercial apparatus. And it was through the same star figure that the form was slowly pressed from within to cause its gradual dismemberment. This eventually signalled a broader change from the motif of the foot-loose, easygoing Uttam persona to an older, more dignified and less adorable kind of a figure. And this trend was only going to get

darker and morally ambiguous as the 1960s progressed. These films also displayed how Uttam's persona transcended simple divisions or genres, subverted typical melodramatic set pieces and upended the commercial deployment of star imagery.

If the city films were one way of signifying this dismemberment, the other were what can be called 'crossover' films. The 'crossover genre' was to be found in the neighbourhood of melodrama but avoided its populist trappings, was grounded in a genteel, evolved critique of their contexts, was rich in narrative and production and usually enriched with some stellar performances. Such films allowed Uttam to play a variety of complex, grey and contrarian characters, which stood in opposition to the image of a matinee idol with 'magical' gifts to overcome impediments to love and middle-class safekeeping. This was a radical shift and one which cemented his reputation as an actor of great range and intelligence. For example, he played an alcoholic in *Sanjeebani* (1952), a distressed psychotic in *Hrod* (1955), a literature professor in *Upohar* (1955), a gullible geek in *Bordidi* (1957), a small-time crook in *Obak Prithibi* (1959), an insolent non-conformist in *Morutirtho Hinglaj* (1959), a humble manservant in *Khokababur Protyaborton* (1960), a Nehruvian utopian in *Shiulibari* (1962), a gallant prince and his cowardly doppelganger in *Jhinder Bondi* (1961), a cold-blooded murderer in *Sesh Anko* (1963), an artful aristocrat in *Lal Pathor* (1964), a tormented psychoanalyst in *Momer Alo* (1964), a witty detective in *Chiriyakhana* (1967), a fiendish humbug in *Aparichito* (1969), a decadent dandy in *Stree* (1972), a wretched loser in *Jodubongsho* (1974) and a sinister, Machiavellian anti-hero in *Baghbondi Khela* (1975). These varied, memorable and prodigious character studies need attention.

All these elements found climactic fulfilment in what can be called his keystone films: *Harano Sur* (1957), *Bicharok* (1959), *Soptopodi* (1961), *Jotugriha* (1964), *Antony Firingee* (1967), *Nogor Dorpone* (1975) and *Agniswor* (1975). Above all, Uttam played himself in Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (1966). At the end of the day, nothing better endears Uttam to the cinephile than his astonishing turn in the film, a film that came at the median of his working life and tapped into the crescendo that his appeal had reached in the mid-1960s. Across these films the star, the actor, the matinee idol had come together in a way that continues to startle both the critic and Uttam's seemingly endless cohort of fans. This broad classification (which the rest of the book more or less adheres to) helps in situating Uttam's cinema productively within their context and in which they can be best revealed as symptomatic of larger turns and twists.

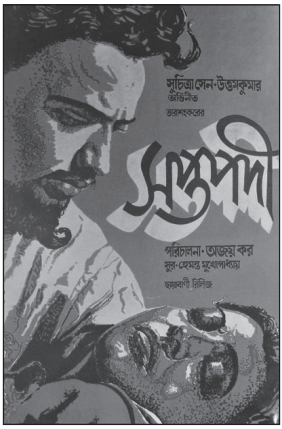

Image 1.2: Romance extraordinaire. Poster of *Soptopodi* (The Seven Steps, 1961)

Source: Author.

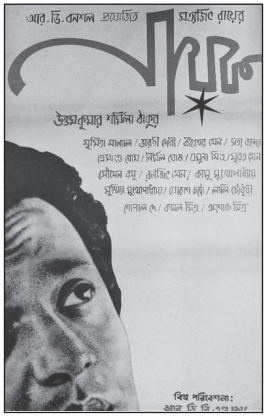

Image 1.3: Ray's observance of the star. Poster of *Nayak* (The Hero, 1966)

Source: Author.

As we will see, Uttam helped reimagine popular cinema, imported a climate of critique to it, and provided it with intellectual ambition and an unflinching sense of 20th century modernity. Uttam's best *romances* were not peddlers of stock expectations; neither were the other dramas exploding with flimsy set pieces. It goes without saying that his better films were only nominally star-driven and rightfully make their case to be among the best of Bengali cinema. To that end, the star-actor and his

cinema are meant to complement each other, instead of the star's image subsuming everything else.

A set of films from his later years reveal the mutations in his star persona, his burning out at the altar of populism and his gradual progress to a kind of decimation. The year that marks the same is 1976, since which the drought of good, even average, roles are too apparent. There is not a single film that stands out and if one counts the dreadful Hindi films, Uttam's downward spiral seems dizzying. His personal appeal remained largely un-corroded but his films started to bomb with a regularity that only his very early films had experienced. His own decisions were largely to be blamed but there were also factors that were extraneous to him, exposing a throng of crises in Bengali social and cultural life. Even if he was planning to walk quietly into the sunset, he couldn't, for he was helplessly chained to the voracity of his industry. His death at work in 1980 fleetingly rescued his box-office performance but that was largely due to a wave of sympathy rather than any appeal of the films.

The story of his filmography does not end here, for there is enough material to deliberate on the many omissions that a long career like Uttam's inevitably divulges. Parimal Ray and Kaji Anirban, who have compiled a gorgeous collection of Uttam's film publicity, have also listed several films which were abandoned or those in which Uttam was replaced. There are other examples mentioned elsewhere. Such things are common in a commercial industry and there is no point ruing every film that did not happen; or which took form with a different cast. At the same time, some of them are bound to pique interest. The case of Satyajit Ray's unmade earlier *Ghare Baire* is referred to later, but one wonders why Chitta Basu's *Jabar Bela Pichu Dake* and Niren Lahiri's *Kantar Konya* in the mid-1950s; Sukumar Dasgupta's *Nodir Namti Anjana* in the early 1960s; and Tapan Sinha's *Kothai Pabo Tare* in the early 1970s did not see light after being formally launched. Of similar instance and the most intriguing was *Anondo Songbad*, which had Uttam and Raj Kapoor in the lead and was to be directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. It was announced in the mid-1960s, tickling the possibility that it could have been the Bengali original of Mukherjee's unforgettable *Anand* (1971). Curious too are the cases of *Kinu Gowalar Goli* (1964) and *Chhutir Fande* (1975), both prominent films, in which Soumitra Chatterjee replaced Uttam after his name was made public. Among the unofficial replacements about six stand out: Bikash Roy substituting Uttam in the early comedy *Chhele Kaar* (The Errant Child, 1954); Raj Kapoor reprising his role in *Ekdin Ratre* (1956), the Bengali version of *Jagte Raho*, after Uttam could not come onboard; Kali Banerjee doing the same for Mrinal Sen's *Neel Akasher Niche* (Under the Azure Sky, 1959);