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The lost ethos of Uttam-Suchitra films

A ‘nostalgic’ review of some classic romances from the Golden Era of Bengali cinema

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The mild tune of the sweet and soft song wrapped in sentimental love, “*Ogo tumi je aamaar... Ogo tumi je aamaar*” (You are mine, only mine...) from the Bengali movie *Harano Sur* (Lost Melody) released in 1957 still buzzes pleasantries, not only inside my ear, but also at the centre of my mind. Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar were considered the ‘golden couple’ of Bengali films from 1953 to 1978. They left their special identities by contributing the best of themselves through their marvellous acting talent. When I reminiscence about some of the Bengali films featuring the superb acting of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen from the depths of my memory, it seems as if both of them are standing before my eyes in all their romantic glory. Such is the power they evoke in me, even today, since I first encountered them in my teenage years in the 1950s.

Since time immemorial man has looked for light, wisdom, eternal peace, sustainable contentment, mystery of immortality and the ultimate motive of that non-existing abstract concept of God. Now there is a big question mark before contemporary human society – whether we are moving forward or backward, whether we are really marching ahead, and if so whether it is in a positive or negative direction? This is a debatable topic, an opinion, which thinking minds will definitely differ on. Of course it is a matter of great joy that cinema as a powerful medium of communication has

been able to touch every aspect of modern human society. This brings us to discussing the status of romance or love in Bengali cinema half a century back.

These divine qualities teach us the hymn of humanity and the art of living. These heavenly qualities are highly essential for the survival of the human society in peace and happiness. Of course, the world of cinema has not totally ignored the importance of these human qualities to be reflected and utilized through the different roles of different characters in different movies. But most modern cinemas in almost all the languages of India are not paying much attention towards the above mentioned heavenly qualities of human beings. “I” and “mine” are replacing the idea of “we” and “ours”.

The Legacy of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen

When I think of Bengali cinema, the image that strikes me first is of Uttam Kumar standing in all his natural aristocracy, expressing his heart-felt love towards Suchitra Sen through his beautiful eyes, without moving his semi-smiling lips. Suchitra Sen, as his beloved on the other hand stands as a paragon of beauty, an image of sublime love, delighted from the depths of her heart with quivering lips, but her lotus like beautiful eyes would never stare straight into the eyes of her lover.

Some unforgettable examples of such unique attitude of the lover and the beloved in certain notable Bengali movies of the mid-twentieth century take me back to those bygone days and its ideas about 'ideal' love, romance, marriage and the sacrifices made by the lover and the beloved, when unable to fulfill the final culmination of any love story in "marriage". This almost ethereal aspect to romance is what I feel thematically unites and uplifts the remarkable movies of the most lovable onscreen romantic couple of Bengali cinema to date - Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen!

Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen jointly starred in 32 Bengali movies. The most popular among them are *Sagarika* (1956), *Harano Sur* (1957), *Rajlakshmi O Srikanto* (1958), *Priya Bandhavi* (1959), *Har Mana Har* (1972), *Kamal Lata* (1969), *Grihadaha* (1967) and *Saptapadi* (1961).

Most of the plots were chosen by the film producers from real life, heart touching stories written by popular Bengali novelists like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Nihar Ranjan Gupta, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, amongst others. Uttam and Suchitra could vividly personify the characters from the novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, especially when the psychological beauty of the then 'ideal' character of the Indian woman was often celebrated over any other aspect of reveal of the feminine grace, charm and identity.

In the unique love story *Kamal Lata*, Suchitra Sen plays the role of a child widow, who resides in an ashram (hermitage) and keeps herself busy mostly with religious rituals. One day she meets Uttam Kumar's character, a young man hailing from a rich aristocratic Brahmin family. The two fall in love with each other; but when Uttam's character proposes marriage to marry Suchitra's character, she refuses and says, 'Will you close your eyes towards caste, culture, tradition and our social norms? I am a widow, I love you very much. But I can't tolerate your humiliation and insult in the eyes of the society.' She then leaves the city in the last scene of their separation. The broken-hearted hero stands silently on the railway platform as the heroine at the door of the compartment of the train, with tearful eyes, calm, quiet and speechless bids goodbye, as the train slowly disappears from the frame. This great sacrifice of self-interest and personal desire to adhere to social norms has no comparison. In this Bengali movie, victory of the ideologies of the Indian cultural heritage over personal desire and worldly pleasures has been preserved and emphasised. The characters of Suchitra and Uttam in their personal sacrifices, uphold tradition, rather than secede into a lonely life of their own, directed by the heart but not sanctioned by the society.

In another Bengali movie, *Rajlakshmi O Srikanto*, Rajlakshmi is a childhood friend of Srikanto and they love each other. Due to

unavoidable circumstances, they are separated and unfortunately Rajlakshmi becomes a prostitute. But when they meet again after a long separation, their sincere 'love' raises its head from the core of their hearts. Rajlakshmi expresses her desire to marry Srikanto, and he finds himself at the crossroads of a great mental conflict. Neither can he accept the marriage proposal gladly, nor can he refuse it directly. The end of this ordinary story is heightened by the impact of Suchitra Sen's interpretation of Rajlakshmi pain as her beautiful large eyes express the intolerable pain of her broken heart at the defeat of a feeble hope of Srikanto's doubtful return. Suchitra Sen's extraordinary expression of an ordinary and common emotion was simply superb, heart-touching and unforgettable. Even today, I remember that beautiful emotional expression of Suchitra's superb acting of intolerable frustration. Her praiseworthy action in the tragic ending of the film for me, was more impressive and memorable than many of Uttam-Suchitra's 'happily ever after' ending films.

In *Saptapadi*, another milestone of the golden couple, Suchitra plays the role of an Anglo-Indian Christian girl. She is studying in a medical college with Uttam Kumar. Here Suchitra, at least appearance wise, is not a calm, quiet, gentle, modest or well-cultured lady, but is rather the exact opposite. As a medical student from an Anglo-Indian

Christian community she is modern, smart, fearless, outspoken, courageous and quarrelsome, in complete contrast to her characters in her other films with Uttam Kumar. In *Saptapadi*, Suchitra once again takes her character to heights of immortality through her empathetic insights into her restive psyche. As lovers, she and Uttam are always quarreling, shouting and fighting with each other during the first half of the film, from the football playground to a stage act, where both acted as hero and heroine in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Soon they fall in love with each other, but cannot not marry because Uttam Kumar's father, who is the priest of a temple is averse to the idea of inter-religious marriages. He approaches Suchitra's character and begs her to return his only son to him; otherwise he would consider himself as 'a child-less father!'. Suchitra promises to pay due regard to the helpless request of Uttam's father. She suddenly puts an unusual request before Uttam, 'Will you convert your religion for an ordinary woman like me?', and leaves him without divulging the real reason of refusal of the marriage proposal made by Uttam's character. Here too, Suchitra's great sacrifice, adhering to Indian traditions is unforgettable. Here the writer of the story does not allow its romantic couple to cross the limits of modesty, morality, honesty and faith as established by their society. In almost all the Bengali films they acted in, Uttam and Suchitra earned stupendous

popularity, also for upholding these cultural values.

Ideologies Presented in the Golden Era

The Bengali cinemas of more than half a century back in which Suchitra and Uttam co-starred, did not show any violence or negativity. They frequently tackled heroine oriented themes and subjects. Moreover, certain human qualities like - beauty, wisdom, sweet speaking, kindness, forgiveness, intellect, empathy, physical discipline, as well as mental purity were regarded as the noblest inner strengths of Indian women. Holding a burning lamp in their hands, bowing down to the feet of the holy basil plant (mother Tulsi) and offering their devotion and prayers to God to shower divine blessings over the heads of their husbands and children, they almost led ascetic like lives within matrimony as virtuous mothers and wives. Properties accumulated in bulk by the men folk became colorless and worthless in the light of their wives' and mothers' steady engagement in practices of austerity for their children and husbands. This high status, noble attitude and selfless service of Indian women in their own houses have been painted by the immortal pen of incomparable story tellers like Sarat Chandra, Bankim Chandra and others that shaped and influenced the narratives of many Bengali cinemas in the middle of the twentieth century .

All these norms, principles and practices were in sync with Indian spiritual, religious and social culture, which were duly regarded, maintained and reflected in the cinemas (in all Indian languages) during the middle of the twentieth century. Here we should not forget the high level thinking of the then writers or novelists whose immortal pens had contributed many good, multi-dimensional noble thoughts to the masses. At this point, we should very carefully observe the central theme of the then movies.

The ultimate goal of both the hero and heroine who were falling-in-love with each other was 'marriage'; neither contractual nor conditional and not even short lived marriage – getting separated from each other through divorce for petty misunderstandings between spouses, as it is a common practice in the modern era, was unthinkable. 'Love' for both of partners was regarded as sacred as austerity, as beautiful as heaven and as peaceful as heavenly bliss. Both the lovers were always aiming at eternal bondage through marriage with the pleasant blessings of their elders, superiors and the society to start a long and happy conjugal life with cordial contentment. If their anxiety, hope or aspiration of marriage was unfortunately disapproved by their elders for some unavoidable constraint of caste, social status, family conflict or any other cause, then it was simply impossible for both the lovers to forget each other or cut off each other's soul to

soul relationship and accept someone else as their life partners. This particular attitude of the hero and heroine of the cine world half a century ago has become dreamlike in movies of the modern era.

In contemporary cinema, when the modern hero (in all Indian languages) while falling in love with his heroine impatiently utters, 'I love you,' the heroine immediately reciprocates with a quick 'I love you too!', as if loving each other is as simple as sharing a chocolate. This kind of prompt expression of the most precious emotion from a person's depth of heart, the most valuable and inexpressible sentiment from one's depth of mind and the most delicate as well as confidential feeling wrapped in the cover of the 'shame and honour' of an Indian woman's inner being simply cannot be expressed by two words – 'love you' or 'thank you'.

We have marched a long way since the 'innocent' cinematic years of the above

mentioned romances and stepped into the 21st century. Much of the ideologies of these films have vanished from the society today, to perhaps even make them look humorous, unusual and unimaginable to some of the current audiences. But those who have watched those films in all their release date glory and excitement will never forget the impact and inspiration of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen – undisputed legends of Bengali cinema! Nor can they forget that heart warming song featuring a young and handsome Uttam Kumar and a graceful Suchitra Sen in *Saptapadi* singing along on a hopeful journey together – “*Aae poth jodi na sesh hoye, tobe kemon hoto tumi bolo to*”(If this path of (love) never ends, then tell me what will happen?)... And could the mid-twentieth century 'golden age' in Bengali cinema have happened without Uttam and Suchitra either... 🙏