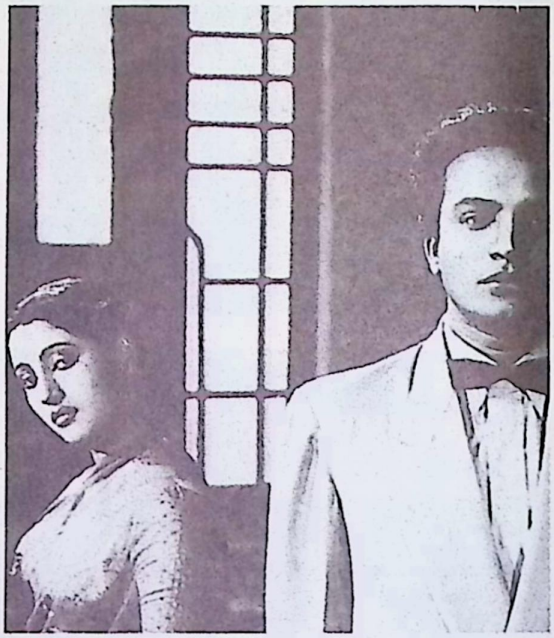
SUCHITRA AND UTTAM

The Quintessence of Bengali Cinema

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The unforgettable pair.

Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar were not the first superstars of the Bengali cinema. That honour goes to singer-actress Kanan Devi, and Promothesh Barua, the stars of the 1942 hit, "Shesh Uttar." Two of Kanan Devi's songs in "Shesh Uttar," - "Chhande Chhande Duli Anande," and "Jodi Apanar Mone Madhuri Mishaye" - are popular to this day. Our mothers crooned these songs. Promothesh Barua, the first authentic Devdas on celluloid, was a trend setter. Young men proudly sported "Barua cut" in the 1940s. Kanan Devi also recorded several Hindi hits. While alcohol cut short Barua's reign, the illegitimate birth of "Kanan Bala" (as she was originally known) unfairly impeded her all her life.

Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar appeared on the scene as a breath of fresh air in 1952, and took Bengali cinema by storm. While Satayjit Ray's movies were garnering critical acclaim among the educated elite in the 1950s, Suchitra-Uttam movies were mega hits among the masses. Non-Bengali critics may have found their acting overly mawkish, but the Bengali audience loved it!



Suchitra and Uttam

Whether portraying the rich or the poor, Suchitra-Uttam personified a degree sophistication and chic that Bengalis adored. Vicariously, we imagined ourselves as debonair as Uttam, and craved to experience Suchitra's charm from a closer proximity. Through their movies Suchitra-Uttam highlighted aspects of Bengali life we could identify with.

We did not go to the movies for intellectual nourishment; we went to movies to see Suchitra-Uttam's portrayals of how people like us loved, betrayed, forgave and reconciled. Most importantly, we wanted to hear them express the gamut of their emotions through enchanting songs. Whatever the emotion was - ecstatic, melancholy or meditative - there was always a perfect song to go with it.

Hemanta Mukherjee (who persuaded Lata Mangeshkar to sing in Bengali) was the singing voice of Uttam Kumar in the movies. (Lata's first Bengali song was Satinath Mukherjee's composition, "Aakash Prodip Jwale"). Who can forget Hemanta's booming "Shuno Bondhu Shuno," and "Jhor Uthechhe Baul Batash," or, the more contemplative, "Shurer Aakashe Tumi Jego Shuktara," and "Boshay Aachhi Potho Cheye" from "Shapmochon"?

Although Geeta Dutt ("Tumi Je Aamar" in "Harano Shur," "Eii Sundaro Swarnali Sandhya" in "Hospital") lip sync-ed for Suchitra Sen in several hit movies, it was Sandhya Mukherjee's voice that captured Suchitra's range of emotions impeccably.