

FROM ROMA TO SUCHITRA SEN

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On her second death anniversary, on January 17, many will remember Suchitra Sen with a deep sense of nostalgia. On this day, two years ago, the greatest ever Bengali cinema artiste, the most charismatic star departed for her permanent abode in the celestial realm leaving behind millions of mourning admirers on both sides of the divide.



Suchitra Sen (April 6, 1931 - January 17, 2014).



SUCHITRA SEN had dominated the silver screen, mostly in Kolkata and briefly in Mumbai, for three decades, beginning in the '50s and ending in mid '70s. After the release of some early films like *Sare Chuattur* and *Ora Thake Odhare*, she soon became the heartthrob of millions of men, and a beauty and fashion idol for millions of young women. Women and girls copied her hairstyle, the way she dressed, the subtle way she did her makeup, the bags she carried and even the way she tilted her neck and looked at her hero with an arched eyebrow.

She was the first modern Bengali star in the true sense of the term who broke away from the old concept of acting and introduced a completely new method, approach, manner, voice modulation, fashion and style, taking the silver screen by storm. In one sentence, elegance was in every inch of her persona.

The Superstar is Born

Suchitra Sen turned into a superstar almost overnight when she paired up with matinee idol Uttam Kumar. Together they took Bengali cinema to a new height. The two names worked like magic to ensure box office success for the producers of the time. *Agni Pariksha*, *Moroner Porey*, *Sobar Uporey*, *Chawa Pawa*, *Shap Mochon*, *Harano Sur*, *Har*, *Indrani*, *Jiban Trishna*, *Harano Sur*, *Alo Amar Alo*, *Sagorika*, *Pothey Holo Deri* and *Shoptpodi* are some of the greatest hits this pair has to their credit. Interestingly, she did not have any prior experience or formal training in acting and yet excelled in all kinds of roles that came her way. She was the definitive romantic heroine of her time but she was equally at ease in doing tragic roles. Besides Uttam Kumar, she also worked with other male lead stars like Ashoke Kumar, Bikash Roy and Shoumitra Chatterji. In Mumbai she paired up with Dev Anand in *Bombai Ka Babu*, Dilip Kumar in *Devdas* and Sanjeev Kumar in *Andhi*.

Early Years in Pabna

Suchitra Sen's father, Karunamoy Dasgupta, was the district sanitary inspector of Pabna district. They lived in a one-storied house in a quiet part of the small town, close to the residence of the civil surgeon. In 1947, she was a student of class nine in Pabna Girls High School. On March 8, 1947, her eldest sister Uma Dasgupta got married. Her father and his close family elders started to feel uncomfortable when they realised that partition was inevitable. Soon after the partition he migrated to Kolkata with his five daughters, Uma, Roma (Suchitra), Hena, Leena and Runa and two sons, Nimai Dasgupta and 4-year old Gautam Dasgupta.

Marriage and Entering the World of Cinema

In Kolkata, her father found a suitable bridegroom in the rich and suave Dibanath Sen, son of Adinath Sen, originally from Gandaria, Dhaka. Roma took her husband's title and became Roma Sen. Her husband's grandfather was Dibanath Sen, a famous rich man of Gandaria those days. The Municipal Corporation of the time had named a street after Dibanath Sen in Gandaria and the street and the name remains unscathed even today. After marriage they used to live in a palatial building in Kolkata. Soon, her only daughter Moon Moon was born.

Perhaps Roma Sen herself had never dreamed of becoming a cinema actress some day. A friend of her father-in-law was in film making. He saw Roma one day and liked her profile and the way she carried herself. He asked her father-in-law whether he would allow Roma to perform in films. He readily agreed and talked with Roma. After the initial discussions were over, she agreed and thus stepped into a hitherto unknown world. She took the stage name Suchitra Sen. The most appropriate words to describe her enormous success in films is, "She came, she saw and she conquered." Bengali films were never the same after she took over.

Pabna Reacts

The residents of Pabna, her schoolmates and friends (This writer's mother was her immediate neighbour and a friend of the same age), were in for a big shock when they watched her films in the late '50s and discovered that the heroine on the big screen was none other than Roma Dasgupta who had lived and gone to school in Pabna till 1947! When the

news got around that the stunningly beautiful heroine Suchitra Sen was someone from Pabna, men and women rushed to cinema halls all over the country to have a look at her. People of Pabna felt especially ecstatic in telling everyone that she was from the same town where they lived. "She is one of us" – women of Pabna would boast.

Awards and Rewards

She had received many national awards for her role in many Bengali movies. Her brilliant performance in *Saat Paake Bandha* fetched her Silver Prize for Best Actress in 1963 in Moscow International Film Festival. It was the first international award to be received by any Bengali film star. Later, in 1972, she received the Padma Shri, one of the highest civilian awards in India. It is reported that in 2005, she declined to receive in person the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, the highest cinematic award in India, as she was not to appear in public. In 2012, she was conferred the *Banga Bibhushan*, West Bengal Government's highest honour. She was highly acclaimed for her performance in the Hindi film *Andhi*.

Long Days and Nights in Solitude

Suchitra Sen had unknowingly created an aura around her which was unique in every way. Her personality on sets and outside was tinged with some distinctiveness that made it impossible for even close friends to read her mind. She was so near yet so far. She was cordial, yet detached. She had lost her husband when she was still young. She was at the pinnacle of success. She was rich and extremely beautiful. There were suitors all around and a strong rumour about her romance with Uttam Kumar was making rounds in the country. At one

stage Uttam Kumar divorced his first wife Gouri and married Supriya Devi. Her fans wondered how she would take that marriage since they so fervently wanted her to marry Uttam Kumar. But her expressions never betrayed whatever was going on in her lonely heart. She maintained a cordial relationship with both of them. When Uttam Kumar died on July 24, 1980 she came to see his dead body, softly touched his face and went away.

It was around that time that she stopped appearing in public. She stopped all her business and social engagements and refused to meet anyone other than her daughter, son-in-law and the two grand-daughters, Riya Sen and Raima Sen. This instantly reminded her fans of the iconic Hollywood actress Greta Garbo who also lived alone in her mansion the last days of her life refusing to go in public. Suchitra Sen also became a recluse cutting herself off from the rest of the world.

Speculations started to mount from various corners: "She loved someone but did not get it back in return.... she is too shocked at the death of her hero Uttam Kumar.... she does not want her fans to see wrinkles on her face....she has become religious and spends time doing puja at home...."

No one will ever know what made Suchitra Sen decide to live in the shadows, after living in the limelight for a long 30 years. Everyone only saw the sparkles in her large romantic eyes, but not the tears that were kept hidden under the surface. She never shared her pain with anyone and finally took it with her to the grave.

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The unbeatable romantic duo Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar.

