

The Bengali Mahanayika & Mahanayak

Enchanting stars and their story

Perhaps the reason they took the Bengali film industry by storm in the 1950s is due to their onscreen chemistry, their excellent choice of literary stories with strong plots and characterisations, and the cohesive use of cinematography to create dreamscapes of love, intimacy, and desire—sometimes even tragic, doomed love.

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On November 29, 1957, the Bengali-language newspaper *Jugantor* carried an advertisement placed by the management of Metro Goldwyn Mayer's (MGM) Metro Film Hall of Kolkata. The advertisement featured a picture of serpentine queues of spectators surrounding the portico of the hall. The building is shown tilting at an angle as if unable to withstand the weight of the spectators. The rest of the advertisement displays a signed telegram from the Metro Company, expressing delight at the huge success of *Chandranath*, starring Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar. This was possibly the first Bengali-language film to be released at Metro, a theatre that had previously only exhibited English-language films. The telegram read: "Heartiest congratulations. Never have we seen such a huge rush at the box office."

On March 22, 2024, another film, *Oti Uttam*, was released in Kolkata. This film uses AI-generated images of footage from the Bengali matinee idol Uttam Kumar's films, and his dialogues from his romantic hits

are interpolated into a contemporary love story. Kumar is depicted in his films and appears as a 'love guru,' dispensing advice to the young protagonist pursuing his love interest in the new film.

Both these events point to the unprecedented iconic popularity of Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar, two stars who became superstars in the 1950s and beyond. The period from 1957 to 2024 marks a long journey showcasing the enduring appeal of these stars of the Bengali film industry in Kolkata.

They stormed the industry in the mid-1950s (though both had started their careers in the late 1940s with major flops) and dominated their field until 1978 and 1980, respectively (Suchitra Sen retired in 1978, and Uttam Kumar passed away in 1980). Yet, the end of their careers has not led to their disappearance from the cinematic firmament of the Bengali public's imagination. Their romantic and individual star personas continue to appear across multiple media platforms: films, fiction, television serials, cover albums, commemorative events, posthumous awards, and nostalgic retrospectives.

What is the allure of these two stars that refuses to fade? Is it that they acted in extremely popular romantic melodramas? Or is it their screen presence and charisma that captivated Bengali audiences, leading to their romantic couple films becoming hits and superhits? They acted in 30 films opposite each other from 1954 to 1978, with 22 of those being love stories in the 1950s alone. Described in superlative terms as the ultimate screen lovers, the 'golden pair' of Bengali cinema, their stardom parallels that of the Raj Kapoor and Nargis pairing in Hindi cinema of the same period. However, what sets them apart is their enduring popularity in the public imagination decades after their heyday.

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Modern love in *Saptapadi*

chemistry, their excellent choice of literary stories with strong plots and characterisations, and the cohesive use of cinematography to create dreamscapes of love, intimacy, and desire—sometimes even tragic, doomed love. The black-and-white magic of these good-looking, fresh young stars on screen carried the spectators along, weaving the enchantment of their love stories.

These love films often focused on depicting urban modern experiences where the lovers met during their professional or educational pursuits in the city and fell in love. The portrayal of this love frequently involved scenes of close intimacy without the presence of family elders or authority figures. Alternatively, their love would transgress some societal or familial tradition, requiring them to overcome such proscription or prohibition. They were cast as doctors, engineers, architects, singers, teachers, etc., where their *bhadralok/bhadramahila* avatars were showcased with unfailing regularity, which helped popularise these films. Most of these films were based on stories penned by notable writers such as Banaphool, Ashapurna Devi, Tarashankar Bandopadhyaya, Ashutosh Mukherjee, Prabhavati Devi Saraswati, and Nirupama Devi, among others. There were also a few films starring Sen and Kumar with other stars from the canonical triumvirate—

Saratchandra, Rabindranath Thakur, and Bankim Chandra.

The romance plots in these films were not without social context and often raised significant questions about the pressing issues of their times: love marriages, love across caste and religious barriers, marital conflicts, social issues like job hunting and unemployment, crumbling civic infrastructures, or wartime scarcities (World War II as well as the India-China war of 1962 were very much a part of the historical and social consciousness of the period). It is not far fetched to suggest that, in the post-independence period of the 1950s, these romantic and modern love stories symbolised the exhilaration and exuberance of freedom and the possibility of charting an individual's journey to achieving personal and emotional fulfilment, challenging conservative traditional values while retaining cultural roots.

One can easily cite films such as *Shaap Mochon*, *Sagarika*, *Chaowa Paowa*, *Harano Sur*, *Saptapadi*, *Suryotoran*, *Agni Pariksha*, *Chandranath*, *Kamallata*,

Grihodaho, and *Rajlaxmi O Srikanto*, to name just a few of their hit films that created an iconic aura of romance, which helped Sen and Kumar take on the mantle of superstars of their time. It is worth mentioning that these films were released in single-screen cinemas, usually as part of a chain release across three screens in Kolkata. Most of the films starring the duo had long exhibition runs, aiding their box-office success, with runs spanning from 13 to 24 weeks from the release date! Predictably, their love films ensured the duo's huge commercial success.

Yet, it is interesting to note that despite the resounding box-office success of their romantic films, both Sen and Kumar were routinely criticised for their repeated appearances in 'hackneyed romantic films' and for the display of charged erotic intimacy on screen in their portrayal of modern love stories. The tremendous popular appeal at the box office came with a heavy note of censure and critical disdain, creating a kind of negative space that Sen and Kumar had to navigate in the early phase of their careers in the 1950s. This moral tone of disdain is evident in the film journalism, reviews, and magazines of the time.

One must remember that the staple of popular film culture was invested in melodramas, which were considered a maligned object of derision because they showcased excessive emotionalism, used stereotypical characters, and were seen as non-realistic in their expression. Most of the critical templates and film evaluation criteria favoured 'realism' as the preferred mode of representation, as it was supposedly able to offer viewers a 'real slice of life,' while melodramas were panned for being 'unrealistic,' repetitive, and overly sentimental.

Moreover, the onscreen depiction of love scenes, romantic and sensuous songs picturised on the duo, and the unbridled display of Sen's glamorous and photogenic beauty, coupled with Kumar's handsome and charismatic screen presence, were criticised for corrupting young minds and audience tastes and were considered to be against genteel good taste—not appropriate for the *bhadralok*. However, fans and spectators were clearly not bothered by what the critics were saying and continued to flock to the film halls in droves, bringing both money and popular fame in equal measure.

This star story and its huge popular appeal were not limited to

just their films together; both Sen and Kumar were equally successful opposite other stars and actors. Their films not only performed well at the box office but also received numerous film awards. Suchitra Sen was known for her strong, author-backed roles in films such as *Dweep Jele Jai*, *Uttar Phalguni*, *Saat Paake Bandha*, *Hospital*, *Smriti Tuku Thak*, *Sandhya Deeper Pradip*, *Boloygrash*, *Devi Chaudhurani*, and even in Hindi films such as *Devdas*, *Bumbai Ka Babu*, *Mamta*, and *Aandhi*, among others.

Uttam Kumar's acting in Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* and *Chiriakhana*, as well as Tapan Sinha's *Zhinder Bondi*, *Khudito Pashan*, *Jotugriho*, *Chowringee*, *Antony Firingee*, *Nishi Padma*, *Anando Ashram*, and *Nabaraag*, along with his stellar performances in character roles (where he was not the protagonist) such as in *Prithibi Amare Chaye*, *Jadu Bangsha*, and *Nagar Darpane*, are some examples that demonstrate his eminently successful career trajectory. Unlike Sen, however, Kumar

had a mixed reception in Bombay cinema. He remade his Bengali superhit *Agnipariksha* as *Choti Si Mulaqat* in Hindi with *Vyajanthimala*, but it was a big flop. Nevertheless, his roles in *Anand Ashram*, *Desh Premi*, and *Amanush* garnered him much appreciation and acclaim.

Uttam Kumar is known to have acted in 202 released films, while Suchitra Sen had 60 films to her credit. Both were recipients of national as well as international film awards. Sen was chosen as the Best Actress at the 1963 Moscow International Film Festival for her role as an estranged wife in *Saat Paake Bandha* opposite Soumitra Chatterjee. Uttam Kumar received awards and accolades for Satyajit Ray's *Nayak*, both at home and at the Berlin Film Festival. Their films also received many Filmfare Awards and BEJA Awards. (Filmfare Awards were instituted by the Times of India newspaper group in 1954, the same year as the National Film Awards were established. BEJA, the Bengal Film Journalists' Association, was founded in 1937 and has since been renamed the West Bengal Film Journalists' Association.)

Sen had gone into a self-imposed reclusive life after she retired from the industry in 1978, rarely appearing in public. The erstwhile *mahanayika* (a moniker she had earned after her Moscow award) eventually came to be known as Tollywood's Greta Garbo. Even in her seclusion, she continued to fuel public interest and curiosity

about her life and circumstances, yet managed to retain her aura of isolation and her refusal to be seen. Her control over her public image was so strong that even after her death in 2014, her body was not shown to the public but was carried in a closed casket for cremation. She had received the Padma Shri in 1972 but refused the Dadasaheb Phalke Award as she did not want to appear in person to receive it, although the Banga Bibhushan Award (instituted by the West Bengal government) was handed over to her daughter, actor Moon Moon Sen, in 2012.

Kumar's sudden death in 1980 plunged the industry into a state of gloom and despair. By the 1970s, he had transformed from being the *mahanayak* into the 'guru,' the figurehead or 'dada,' the elder brother figure who could carry the burden of ensuring good box-office collections despite his ill health and the declining industry standards due to the social and political turmoil in the state. The terrible lock-outs, grain shortages,

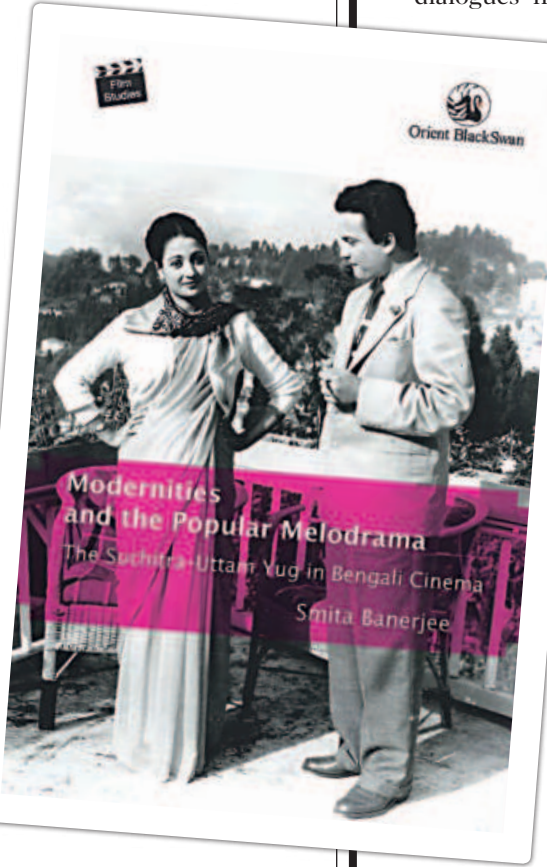


A poster of *Saptapadi*

Naxalite movement, and its brutal suppression by the state had impacted the film industry just as much as they did other sectors of the economy. It almost became Uttam Kumar's sole responsibility to deliver hits as the bankable matinee idol. His untimely death dealt a huge blow to the film industry, from which it took time to recover.

However, both Sen and Kumar continue to appear and reappear in contemporary times and still manage to draw substantial attention despite their absence. The internet remains abuzz with the circulation of their film and publicity stills, new fan sites, documentaries, and reportage about them. Television serials, such as *Mahanayak*, capitalise on the gossip and rumours about their troubled personal lives; contemporary film stars such as Mithun Chakraborty, Prosenjit, and Jishu pay tribute to Kumar by modelling their acting style on his or portraying him on screen (*Shukno Lanka*, *Autograph*, and *Mahalaya*). Novellas, such as *Suchitra Sen: Uttoron O Antaraal*, fictionalise the rumoured love story between these two romantic icons, and there exists a veritable industry of unauthorised biographies about them. Kumar wrote a serialised autobiography in *Nabakallol*, which was later posthumously published as *Amar Ami* (1980), while Sen assiduously refused to write or commission one, claiming that her life story would have to reveal many unpalatable facts about several well-known figures. Despite this, there are some ten or more biographies about her published by film journalists, while Kumar also has numerous books, as well as dedicated special issues brought out by reputed film societies of Kolkata. The enchantment of this duo continues to haunt the public imagination long after its constitutive moment and continues to weave its magic on the Bengali cinematic firmament even today.

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