When Kishore Kumar voiced for Uttam Kumar – A short-lived golden saga

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In the late 1990s, *The Gramophone Company*, commonly referred to as *HMV* at the time, made a decision to release four cassette tapes to the Bengali audience, featuring songs extracted from films starring Uttam Kumar. The project was designed to release every single cassette containing the voice of a single leading singer singing for Uttam Kumar in various Bengali songs.

The project moved well initially with an easy compilation of songs by Hemant Kumar singing for Uttam Kumar, as there was a plethora of songs available by the artist used in Uttam's lip. The next two cassettes were also released soon, containing songs sung by Manna Dey and Shyamal Mitra singing for Uttam.

The *HMV* repertoire team led by Amal Bandopadhay then faced a gargantuan task as the next project was meant to be Kishore Kumar singing for Uttam Kumar.

Knowing that the commercial acceptability of any Kishore Kumar cassette is much greater than anything else, *HMV's* Calcutta office found it difficult to fill a standard cassette with an adequate number of songs sung by Kishore and filmed by Uttam Kumar.

Finally, after a lot of research and the hard act of salvaging near-forgotten tapes from archives, they were able to launch the compilation that came on the market in 2000. It was the highest-selling product in that project and perhaps gave *HMV* officials the biggest challenge to produce. It was found that there are only 28 songs by Kishore Kumar in Bengali and Hindi that he sang for Uttam Kumar, and out of those, *HMV* does not own three of them.

Uttam Kumar and Kishore Kumar are contemporary. One was born in 1926 and the other in 1929, and both started their film careers in 1946 in two different film cities.

Uttam Kumar's career as the top Bengali hero of the Bengali silver screen ran from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Though he was the unchallenged king of the industry until his untimely death on 24 July 1980, he was no longer in his prime in his last few years as a hero because of his age and unmanaged health.

When Uttam was ruling Bengali cinema in the 1950s and mid-1960s, Kishore Kumar, who made his debut in 1946 both as an actor and singer in Hindi cinema, was still passing through many tumults in his career and also in his personal life.

Though Kishore rendered some of the gems of Hindi songs in many of the films in the 1950s and mid-1960s, he

was still not the first choice for many music directors who considered Md Rafi and, to some extent, Manna Dey or even Mukesh as the voices of the leading men in any film. There were practically no Hindi movies released in that era where all the songs in the voice of the hero were sung by Kishore Kumar. Even after acting in nearly 80 movies as a hero, Kishore was considered mostly a comic hero, not a romantic one.

In Bengal, Kishore acted in three movies as a hero, and out of those, one was a smash hit, while the other two did average business. The world of Bengali film songs was dominated by Hemant Kumar, Manna Dey and Shyamal Mitra. Except for Satyajit Ray, Nachiketa Ghosh and Hemant Kumar, no one in Bengal used Kishore in Bengali movies as a singer until 1968.

The year 1969 changed the game. The release of *Aradhana* under the music direction of SD Burman uplifted Kishore to an insurmountable height of fame, and in the next 2 years or so, thanks to RD Burman and Kalyanji-Anandji, Kishore Kumar passed Rafi as the big ticket playback singer in Hindi cinema, a crown he protected till his death on 13 October 1987.

In 1969, for the first time, Kishore Kumar gave his voice to Uttam Kumar in an exceptional Bengali movie named *Sabarmati*, directed by Hiren Nag. The music of the film was scored by Gopen Mallick, and Kishore got a chance to sing a duet with Ela Basu.

On the screen, part of the song sung by Kishore Kumar was enacted by Uttam Kumar and Bhanu Bandopadhay. Though *Sabarmati* had many more songs filmed on Uttam by other voices, this song turned out to be the most popular, and with this, a new era started in the Bengali film industry: Uttam-Kishore on screen.

In 1970, a high-budget film named *Rajkumari*, directed by Salil Sen and starring Uttam Kumar, Tanuja, Pahari Sanyal, Helen, etc., hit the screen, and in this film, RD Burman made his debut in Bengali film as music director.

RD was the first to allot all songs to Kishore meant for Uttam on screen. *Rajkumari's* music is considered one of the finest works of RD Burman for any Bengali film on which he worked as a music director. He gave three full songs and a small fraction of a song to Kishore, all beautifully penned by Gouriprasanna Majumdar.

The songs initially did very well in the music market and on radio, but as soon as the film was released and did badly at the box office, the songs also went to oblivion. Within a few years, RD Burman used the same tune in various Hindi songs in various films, and all became classical super hits.

The tune of the Bengali song *Ey Ki Holo, Kyano Holo* was given in *Yeh Kya Hua (Amar Prem*, 1972), *Tobu Bole Kyano* was given in *Dekho Yeh Mere Bandhe Haat (Bandhe Haat*, 1973), *Bando Dwareer Andhokare* in *Aaap Ke Kamre Mein Koi (Yadoon Ki Baraat*, 1973), and *Aaaj Gun Gun Gunje Amar* was given in *Pyar Diwana Hota Hain (Kati Patang*, 1971), and all those songs made RD Burman immortal in the history of Hindi cinema.

Surprisingly, when these songs were sung by Uttam in Bengali, a section of critics showed displeasure, accusing Kishore of being a misfit in the voice of Uttam Kumar.

Kishore Kumar was back as the voice of Uttam again in 1975 when he did a double-version movie named *Amanush* under the direction of Shakti Samant. The film was a superhit in both versions, and in both movies, Shyamal Mitra used Kishore in an exceptional way. Three songs in each of the versions became superhits, and out of those, *Ki Ashai Bandhi Khelaghar*, penned by Gouriprana Majumdar in Bengali, and *Dil Asia Kisi Ne Mera Toda*, penned by Indiveer in Hindi, are still considered classics.

Amanush proved that RD Burman's experiment of using Kishore in the voice of Uttam was no mistake, and the success of *Amanush* created a renewed interest in all five-year-old songs of *Rajkumari* rendered by Kishore for Uttam.

Kishore, Shyamal Mitra, and Shakti Samant teamed up again with Uttam Kumar in 1977 for another big-ticket double-version movie, *Ananda Ashram*.

The film was loaded with stars like Uttam Kumar, Ashok Kumar, Utpal Dutta, Sharmila Tagore, Rakesh Roshan, and Mousumi Chatterjee. Here also, Kishore sung all songs for Uttam in both versions, and again, songs like *Amar Swapno Tumi*, a duet with Asha Bhonsle, and a solo *Asha Chilo Bhalobasha Chilo* cemented Kishore Kumar as an unchallenged singer in the Bengali music world, though, thanks to his busy schedule in Bombay, he was very irregular in Bengal. In Hindi, *Sara Pyar Tumhara* scaled up in the Vividh Bharati list and kept *HMV*'s record sales on track.

In 1978 and 1979, we find two films where Kishore sang for Uttam, and both were double versions. The music for both films was scored by Shyamal Mitra, and both were superflops at the box office.

Bandi was directed by Alo Sarkar Uttam's friend, who was the director of his first Hindi film, *Choti Si Mulaqat*, which caused Uttam heavy financial loss.

In *Bandi*, there was one duet song of Kishore and Asha filmed on Uttam Kumar, where he shared the screen with Amjad Khan, Prema Narayan and Omresh Puri.

The song *Mone Na Rong Lagle Pore Ei Holi Kyamon Holi* is one of the very few Holi songs in Bengali cinema. The other song in the film was *Mone Hoi Swarge Achi*, a solo by Kishore. Both the songs were used in the Hindi version (*Range Na Man Rang Me Agar* and *Haat Mein Jaam Na Loon*), and Kishore did the highest justice to his talent.

However, the film was a disaster, and songs went untraceable. Now these songs are treated as gems.

Next was *Nishan*, a film produced by *Gemini Picture* of Madras and directed by SS Balan.

The period film was released on 31 December 1979, and did poor business. In this film, Kishore Kumar teamed up again with Shyamal Mitra and sang two duets with Arati Mukherjee. The songs *Pran Bhora Swapno* and *Tumi Je Pramer* failed to make any impact among listeners because of their poor lyrics and insipid music. This is perhaps the most forgettable Uttam Kumar film in which Kishore gave voice to him.

The last Bengali film paired by Uttam and Kishore was released in 1981, a year after Uttam Kumar's death.

By that time, the enigma of Uttam Kumar was at its zenith, as was the film *Ogo Bodhu Sundori*, in which a young Bappi Lahiri scored the music. He used Kishore Kumar's zinging energy. Bappi Lahiri used Kishore in three songs, all screened by Uttam Kumar.

Eito Jibon Jak Na Jey Dike, the song that shows Uttam in a tipsy mood with a bottle of *VAT-69* in his hand, became a cult song in Bengal. Another smash hit was *Sudhu Tumi Noi Abollakanto. Ogo Bodhu Sundari* did massive business. It was the last film in which Uttam worked, even on the day he died. The emotionally shattered Bengali cinegoers, for the sake of recovering themselves, made both the film and Kishore Kumar's songs immortal.

Uttam, when he produced a Hindi film in 1966 in Bombay named *Choti Si Mulaqat*, took Shankar Jaikisan as music director, and all songs in male voice were sung by Rafi. This shows Uttam's non-confidence in both RD Burman and Kishore Kumar at that point in time, but in the late 1970s, when he himself directed and acted in a Bengali film, *Kalankini Kankabati*, he took RD Burman as music director, and a matchless song was sung in that film by Kishore Kumar with Asha Bhonsle. The song, though, was picturised by Mithun Chakraborty.

There was another Bengali film named *Pratishodh*, in which Uttam Kumar acted and Kishore Kumar sang a song, but that was also not filmed with Uttam on the screen.

Both *Kalankini Kankabati* and *Pratishodh* were released after Uttam's demise.

Why did the Bengali film industry not use Kishore Kumar when Uttam was at the pinnacle of his career? Was there any fear that people well-accustomed to listening to Hemant Kumar and Manna Dey in Uttam Kumar's voice would not like Kishore Kumar?

Film historian and veteran film journalist Chandi Mukherjee is of the opinion that the main reason for not having Kishore Kumar in Uttam's film or any Bengali film during 1950—60 is only due to budget. An average Bengali film was not financially strong enough to get Kishore in those days, as he was much more expensive than any famous Bengali singer. More to that, Kishore, though himself a Bengali, was never extra emotional when singing Bengali songs. His work with Satyajit Ray in *Charulata* and with Hemant Kumar in four Bengali movies in the 1960s is all due to his cordial personal relations with these people. Even after singing for Uttam Kumar in 1969 and 1970, he did not sing a single song for Uttam till Bombay-based *Shakti Films* inked him to do so in *Amanush*.

Uttam's comfort zone with Kishore had been increasing since 1975, and in 1980, when they were nearly made for each other, a cruel event took Uttam away, giving him no chance to create any new history in Bengali cinema.

Ironically, from 1980 on, Kishore Kumar became a very frequent playback singer in the Bengali film industry. In the next 8 years, he rendered many unmatched and unimaginable songs for upcoming heroes like Ranjit Mallick, Tapas Pal, Prasenjit Chatterjee, Chiranjit Chatterjee, Joy Banerjee, Victor Banerjee and even Sukhen Das, but sadly, Uttam Kumar, the biggest name in Bengali cinema, was missing from that list.

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