



Utpal Dutt: The Revolutionary Voice of Theatre

Dr Sanobar Haider,

Associate Professor,

History,

G.D.C Kuchlai,

Sitapur



(March 29, 1929 - August 19, 1993)

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Abstract- Utpal Dutt an actor, director, writer, playwright, and theatre activist left an indelible mark on Bengali theatre and Indian cinema over a career spanning 40 years. Born in Barisal, Bengal Presidency (now Bangladesh), Dutt's educational journey took him from St. Edmund's School, Shillong, to St. Xavier's Collegiate School, Kolkata, and finally to St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, from where he graduated with honours in English Literature in 1949. His association with theatre began with Geoffery Kendell's Shakespeareana, but it was his 1949 production of Julius Caesar, that drew parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary politics, that showcased his innovative approach and set the stage for a remarkable career ahead.

Keywords-Theatre, Cinema, Actor, Stage, Dramaturg

No titan of yesteryear's cinema enthralls the imagination quite like Utpal Dutt, the legend, the maestro, the classical artist crowned with national honours. His life was a consecration to the eternal flame of theatre, a passion he nurtured with unyielding devotion. This article bows in homage to a man who was revolutionary in spirit and versatile in genius, a polymath of Bangla, English, and Hindi, whose artistry embodied the very soul of India's cultural heritage. Utpal Dutt was not merely an actor; he was a stage philosopher, a dramatist of conscience, and a living testament to the grandeur of our nation's artistic legacy.

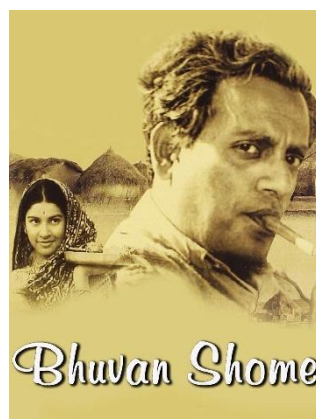
Utpal Dutt, is described as a phenomenon of Bangla theatre, defying categorization as just an actor, dramaturg, or playwright. He was a master of all, leaving an indelible mark on the world of theatre and cinema. Samik Bandhopadhyay in one of his interviews about the legendary actor said - '*He is our dramaturg, the dramaturg, the only dramaturg of the Indian theatre.*'¹ It is important here to understand who a dramaturg is. According to the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, Canada's oldest English language theatre centre-*A dramaturg, in short, is a literary editor for plays who primarily works with scripts during the writing process, supporting the playwright while also serving as an outside eye for edits and changes.*²

A successful actor, director, writer, playwright, and theatre-activist Utpal Dutt remained a radical figure in Bengali theatre and Indian cinema for more than 40 years. He was born on 29th March 1929, at Barisal the Bengal presidency of British India (Bangladesh).³ He completed his early education at St. Edmund's School, Shillong, and later matriculated from St. Xavier's Collegiate School, Kolkata in 1945. Dutt went on to graduate with honours in English Literature from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata (Calcutta), which was affiliated to the University of Calcutta, in 1949. Having shown early signs of interest in theatre, Dutt soon came in contact with Geoffery Kendell, an English actor and theatre director who led the repertory theatre company 'Shakespeareana' on tour throughout India in the 1940s and 1950.⁴ But even before gaining wider recognition with the Kendell group, immediately after graduating from St. Xavier's in 1949, Utpal Dutt staged a groundbreaking production, a modern adaptation of the play Julius Caesar. In his bold reinterpretation, he managed to draw parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary politics. Staging *Julius Caesar* immediately after independence at that point of time was a historical dramaturgical intervention in Indian theatre. Soon after this Utpal Dutt toured different parts of the Indian sub continent and even Pakistan along with Shakespeareana group delivering outstanding performances, enacting Shakesperean plays. He earned acclamation for his passionate portrayal of Othello. He proved his metal despite not being trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, which was considered to be the standard for any theatre artist at that time.

When Geoffery Kendell left India, Utpal Dutt founded the *Little Theatre Group* initially producing English plays. Later, he started to stage Bengali plays like Kallol, Angar and Tiner Talwar which are till date considered masterpieces and without which the annals of Indian theatre will always remain incomplete.

It was during his performance of Othello, that renowned filmmaker Madhu Bose, who was looking for a male lead for his biographical film on Michael Madhusudan Dutt, happened to watch the play. This chance encounter led Utpal Dutt to earn an offer to act in the film which he most willingly accepted. This was an opportunity to widen the canvas of acting which paved the way for a rich career on silver screen for this

iconic performer. His career in films spanned an oeuvre of more than 100 films covering forty years. Utpal Dutt shone in the eponymous role in the film '*Bhuban Shome*' as an officious bureaucrat working for the Indian Railroad in Bengal.⁵ The black and white film, shot entirely in Rajasthan's desert landscape, showcases K.K. Mahajan's unparalleled cinematography. Utpal Dutt delivered a remarkable performance, infusing the character with his signature comic flair. However, beneath the humour, the film's protagonist, Shom saheb (Utpal Dutt), undergoes a transformative journey, discovering the harsh realities of his subordinate's life and, in the process, unearthing the essence of humanity. Mrinal Sen's film is a poignant exploration of human resilience, beautifully capturing the struggles and virtues of the human spirit. In 1992, Satyajit Ray the legendary director made '*Agantuk*'. Utpal Dutt delivered one of the best performances of his career in this cult classic.⁶ He played the role of a stranger who loves to call himself '*Nemo – or, 'Mr. No One!*' Dutt essayed his character with such brilliance that it is impossible to imagine anyone else in that particular role thereafter. The enigmatic character of Manomohan Mitra (Utpal Dutt) sparked speculation, with many interpreting him as a semi-autobiographical representation of Satyajit Ray himself, adding a layer of depth to the narrative. In the film '*Hirak Raja Deshe*', which is an allegory of contemporary politics Utpal Dutt, slips into the character of Hirak Raja supremely. In the film, a famine stricken rural Bengal sees Goopy and Bagha using their three boons to put an end to all the wrongs of the greedy Diamond king (Hirak Raja) and giving the children a taste of freedom. Soumitra Chatterjee played the rebellious school teacher leading to an uprising against the dictatorship of Hirak Raja. Utpal Dutt's portrayal of Maganlal Meghraj is iconic, he created the character as one of Bengali cinema's most memorable villains. Dutt's masterful performance brought to life a very clever charismatic character, being blend of wit, guile, and menace, making him a compelling presence on screen. Dutt delivered an impeccable performance as Hossian Miya in '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'. The film was an Indo-Bangladesh joint venture inspired by a novel of the same name by Manik Bandopadhyay. The film revolves around protagonist Hossain, a Bengali Muslim who dreams of establishing a little Utopia on an island in the Padma delta and doesn't care whether the people living there are Hindus or Muslims.⁷



This was followed by Dutt's debut appearance in Hindi cinema in *Saat Hindustani* (1969), directed by K. A. Abbas. This film interestingly also marked the debut of Amitabh Bachchan. In the story, Dutt portrayed a Punjabi Sikh soldier, while Bachchan played a mysterious character from an oppressed community. The narrative centred on the Goa Liberation movement, with seven protagonists, each representing a different

ethnic background standing together as ‘Hindustanis’. Besides his iconic performance in Bengali cinema he gradually earned a special place for himself in hindi films. The wit, humour and screen presence that Dutt commanded can very well be seen through his roles in *Gol Maal* (1979), *Naram Garam* (1981), *Rang Birangi* (1983), *Shaukeen* (1982), and *Kissi Se Na Kehna* (1983). The actor’s celebrated role as **Bhavani Shankar**, the stern, mustache loving boss in Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s comedy masterpiece *Gol Maal* portrayed his comic brilliance. He played the role of a man obsessed with traditional values perfectly balanced by Amol Palekar’s witty performance in this masterpiece of mistaken identities and mayhem.

Utpal Dutt was however much more than an actor on screen. He was an avowed communist with his greatest contribution to the arts scene being the revolutionary stage successes which altered the course of Bengali drama. The experience of making theatre with IPTA while engaging with communist politics and Marxist philosophy, though short-lived, became foundational in Dutt’s subsequent journey as a political theatre artist.⁸ Similarly his work in *Jatra*, a traditional Bengali folk theatre form, showcases his commitment to using art as a means of social commentary. He was instrumental in popularising the Jatra and formed his own Jatra group, composing several plays in many of which he performed as well. Minerva theatre in Kolkata became his prime address which he took on lease in 1959 for his theatrical performances.



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Minerva Theatre

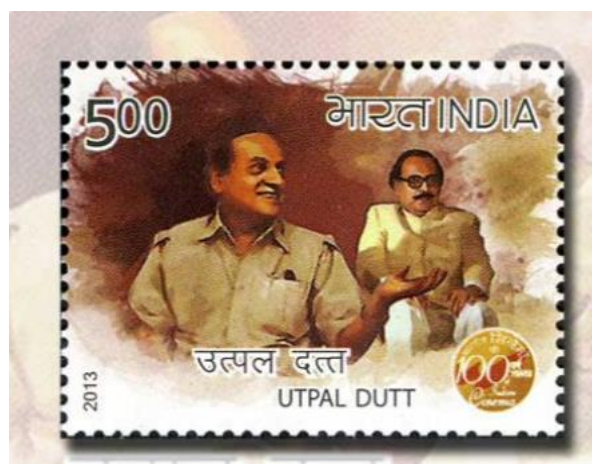
His involvement with theatre from 1971 to 1988 highlights themes of resistance against colonial and authoritarian regimes, leaving a lasting impact on the genre. First staged in 1965, his longest running play *Kallol*, invoked political and authorial censure.⁹ The play was a powerful commentary on the oppression and hypocrisy of colonial governance. It was set against the tumultuous backdrop of the 1946 Royal Indian Navy Mutiny and carried anti government tones for which Utpal Dutt was detained for several months. His

stay in jail opened a new chapter of rebellious, and politically charged plays, including *Tiner Toloar* (The Tin Sword), partially based on *Pygmalion*, *Dusshapner Nagari* (Nightmare City), *Manusher Odhikare* (Rights Of Man), based on the Scottsboro Boys case, protests against the racial discrimination and injustice of the Scottsborough trial of 1931, *Surya-Shikar* (Hunting the Sun) in 1978, *Maha-Bidroha* (The Great Rebellion) in 1989, and *Laal Durgo* (Red Fort) in 1990 and *Janatar Aphim* (Opiate of the People), 1990, a play which lamented the Indian political parties' exploitation of religion for gain.¹⁰

Utpal Dutt was awarded the lifetime fellowship by Sangeet Natak Academy for his contribution towards theatre. He won National Awards in 1974 for Best Feature Film 'Chorus', in 1969 for Best Actor for 'Bhuvan Shome', and a Special Mention (Film Critic) in 2006. He also won Filmfare Awards for Best Actor in A Comic Role for 'Gol Maal' (1980) and 'Naram Garam' (1982).¹¹ Indian Postal Department issued 5 Rupee commemorative stamps to honour this iconic film personality in 2013.¹²

This great actor-performer was married to Shobha Sen, a prominent figure in theatre and film, and a key member of the People's Little Theatre group alongside him. The couple is survived by their daughter, Dr. Bishnupriya Dutt, who is a Professor of Theatre and Performance studies, in the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi India. Professor Dutt and her family proudly house the National Film Award (for Best Actor) won by Utpal Dutt for his stellar performance in the film *Bhuvan Shome*.

The legendary actor leaving behind a vast, enduring legacy of work passed away on 19 August 1993, due to a heart attack in Kolkata at the age of 64 leaving a void in the world of theatre and films.



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However his legacy continues to be shaped by contemporary reinterpretations of his theatre. His body of work constitutes a reservoir of cultural memory, where his plays and theatrical methods serve as enduring reminders of the role of history in shaping the present. At the same time, the future of political theatre is being actively redefined by a new generation of directors, actors, and dramaturgs who engage with Dutt's oeuvre to render it relevant to current contexts. Their reinterpretations facilitate a deeper understanding of the conceptual and material conditions of the postcolonial moment. Dutt's theatre continues to function not as a static monument to history, but as a dynamic site of inquiry and praxis, enabling successive generations to negotiate the intersections of art, politics, and decolonial thought.

In the grand symphony of Indian cinema, Utpal Dutt's presence shines as a timeless beacon - a man who carried the gravitas of theatre into the silver screen and infused every role with intellectual fire and cultural depth. His journey was not merely that of an actor, but of a visionary who bridged stage and celluloid, leaving audiences spellbound with performances that were at once entertaining and enlightening. From his revolutionary spirit to his mastery of languages, he stood as a custodian of India's artistic conscience, reminding us that cinema is not only a spectacle but also a mirror of society. Though the curtain fell on his life's drama, Utpal Dutt remains an immortal light of passion, intellect, and artistry whose legacy continues to inspire generations of performers and dreamers alike.

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Pictures

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