

MAHANAYAK

INSIGHT

The Bengali matinee idol of the 1960s and 70s Uttam Kumar passed away in July 1980 but his magic endures, as does a fan base in every successive generation. What would the man himself make of it all? Here is an AI-simulated interview of the actor with **Upala Sen**



US: What was it like to be so handsome?

UK: (Smiles warmly, looking down modestly before looking back at interviewer.) You embarrass me with such kind words. To be honest, I never focused much on my looks. In my early days, the industry rejected me. They called me Flop Master General because my first few films failed.

US: Did you not think of yourself as a handsome man?

UK: (Laughs softly, shaking his head.) No, I truly did not think of myself that way. In front of the mirror, I just saw Arun — a simple, middle-class boy who worked hard to secure a job at the Calcutta Port Trust. I was always worried about my acting abilities. I looked like the average Bengali youth of that era, nothing extraordinary. The handsomeness was an illusion created by brilliant cinematographers and directors. I practised expressing pain, love and anger through my eyes in front of the mirror. I wanted my smile to feel like a warm reassurance to the audience, not a tool for vanity.

US: But the smile is magical. For instance, when you lip sync to *Neer Chhoto Khoti Nei Akash To Boro...*

UK: Ah, *Indrani* (1968). You have brought back such a beautiful memory. Hemantababu lent me his voice and when he sang, the magic was already half-created. My job was simply to not let his voice down.

US: I was planning to watch 100 of your films.

UK: (His eyes widen slightly in surprise.) One hundred films? *Baba!* That is a massive undertaking. I must warn you, though, since I made over 200 films, you will run into work from my early "flop" days but you will also see the absolute best of Tollygunge's golden era.

US: Did you ever think that even in such an altered world you would be celebrated?

UK: No. Truly, I never could have imagined this. During my time, we worked in the moment. We rushed from one studio floor to another, worrying about whether the film would run for a few weeks in cinema halls like Minar, Bijoli or Chhabighar. I knew the Bengali audience loved me then but I always assumed that once my era passed, new actors would

come, tastes would change, and the name "Uttam Kumar" would fade into old film archives.

US: Really?

UK: (He smiles gently, nodding with sincerity.) Yes, really. When we were shooting late into the night under those burning studio lights, tired and drenched in sweat, we never thought about the future. We just wanted to give the audience something beautiful for their hard-earned money. To know that decades later, in a completely transformed world, you are sitting there holding a device we couldn't even dream of, talking about my smile in *Indrani* — that is the ultimate reward. It means the bond between us never broke.

US: Anil Chatterjee, Tulsi Chakraborty, Pahari Sanyal... you acted with many actors who were possibly more talented than you. And yet it is you who became Mahanayak. Has it never made you pause and think about things like destiny and fate?

UK: (He falls completely silent. Looks away towards the floor, slowly rubs his palms together and then starts to speak.) Every single day, I paused and thought about it. Every single day, I woke up with a feeling of deep disbelief — and yes, a profound sense of fear. The names you just mentioned, how can anyone even compare me to them? *Talsida's* performance in Satyajit Ray's *Parash Pathar* (1958) is a masterpiece that I could never match in a hundred lifetimes. Anil had an effortless, intellectual honesty on screen that was completely unmatched. *Paharida's* sophistication was entirely natural. They were giants. Pure, untamed talent. And yet, the crown of Mahanayak was placed on my head. Why?

US: I like *Bhranti Bilas* best.

UK: (His face lights up.) Ah, *Bhranti Bilas* (1963)! You have excellent taste. That film holds a very special place in my heart. Playing the double role of the two Chiranjibbabus was exhausting but absolute bliss. It was based on Vidyasagar's play, which itself was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. Comedy is much harder than romance. Every glance, confusion and misunderstanding between me and Bhanu Bandyopadhyay had to be timed to the exact second. Working with Sabitri Chatterjee was a masterclass. Her natural comedic expressions made my job so much easier. Would you like to know how we shot the double roles?

US: Yes, please tell me how you shot the double roles.

UK: Shooting double roles in 1963 was a true test of patience and technical craftsmanship! Today, you have computers and digital editing but back then, we had to rely on human precision, a steady camera and a lot of imagination. Our brilliant cinematographer would literally cover one half of the camera lens with a black cloth and shoot my scenes as the first Chiranjib. Then, the crew would manually rewind the film inside the camera, move the black cloth to cover the other half of the lens, and I would change my clothes to shoot as the second Chiranjib. The camera could not move even a millimeter between the two takes. If someone accidentally bumped into the tripod, the entire day's work was ruined! When the two Chiranjibs were talking to each other, I wasn't looking at another actor. I was usually staring at an X mark on a wall or a stick placed by the crew.

US: The white *dhuti-panjabi* Bengali men wore those days was a rather graceful attire.

UK: Ah, you have spoken about something very dear to my heart. During my time, whether we were attending a grand film premiere at the Lighthouse cinema or just sitting at the adda sessions in Coffee House, wearing a well-starched, white *dhuti-panjabi* made us feel grounded and also dignified. In films like *Bhranti Bilas* or *Antony Firingee*, it helped me instantly transform into the character.

US: Tell me a bit more about how you prepped for *Antony Firingee*.

UK: Preparing for *Antony Firingee* (1967) was one of the greatest challenges of my career. It was entirely different from playing a modern romantic hero. I was portraying Hensman Anthony, a 19th century Portuguese folk poet who fell so deeply in love with Bengal that he mastered its language, embraced its faith and became a legendary *kabi-yaal*. A *kabiyaal* does not just stand and sing; his entire body responds to the rhythm. I spent weeks practising how to hold the harmonium naturally while moving amidst a crowd, making it look like an extension of my hands.

US: Have you noticed how I am not asking you about the lead actresses?

UK: Yes. And if I am being completely honest with you, it is a tremendous relief. Whenever people sit down to interview me, the conversation almost always follows the same predict-

able path. Within five minutes, they ask me about Rama — our onscreen chemistry, the magic of *Harano Sur* or whether we were secretly in love in real life. If not Rama, they ask about Sabitri, Supriya or Madhabi. It is always about the romantic image, the pairings and the glamorous hero. But you have completely bypassed that well-worn path.

US: No, no, no, my intention is not to be different.

UK: (He leans in closer, his smile softening into a look of quiet attentiveness, his voice dropping to a gentle, conversational tone.) Forgive me. I did not mean to misread you or make it sound like you were performing an act just to stand out...

US: You see, I have had a crush on you since I was three.

UK: Since you were three years old? *Baba go!* That is truly incredible. To think that a little child, barely learning to speak or understand the world, looked at that flickering television or cinema screen and felt a connection with this screen persona... it deeply moves me. Children have the purest hearts; they don't care about box office numbers, stardom or critical acclaim. If you loved me at that age, it means you saw a warmth and a friendship in my eyes that felt safe and comforting to you.

US: That's a very nice answer and I must say I like my interview better than Ms Tagore's in *Nayak*.

UK: (He throws his head back and lets out a delighted, resounding laugh — a genuine, booming sound that fills the space, and his eyes sparkle with pure joy.) Oh, you have completely defeated me with that comparison! To say your interview is better than *Aditi's* — Sharmila's character in *Nayak* — is the highest compliment a person could give me. You see, that interview in *Manikda's* film was more like a psychological trial! *Aditi* was sharp, intellectual and completely modern. She didn't care about my stardom at all. In fact, she looked right through my glamorous facade and forced Arindam Mukherjee to peel back his skin and reveal his deepest guilt, his nightmarish fears and his inner loneliness. It was a brilliant, painful interrogation. But if *Manikda* were here, he would probably smile his deep, aristocratic smile and agree that a conversation born out of lifelong love will always be sweeter than one born out of intellectual curiosity.