

BOOKS

Star-Crossed Actors

Smita Banerjee's Modernities and the Popular Melodrama: The Suchitra-Uttam Yug examines the most successful pairing in Bengali cinema

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The story goes that a Bengali director wanted to remake the Hindi hit *Dosti* (1962), a tale of two young boys, one blind and one lame. "Who will you cast," asked a friend, "Uttam and Suchitra?" The joke serves as a great indicator, especially for the non-Bengali cinema lover, of the power of this screen couple who became "metonyms for love and modern romance". Beginning with 22

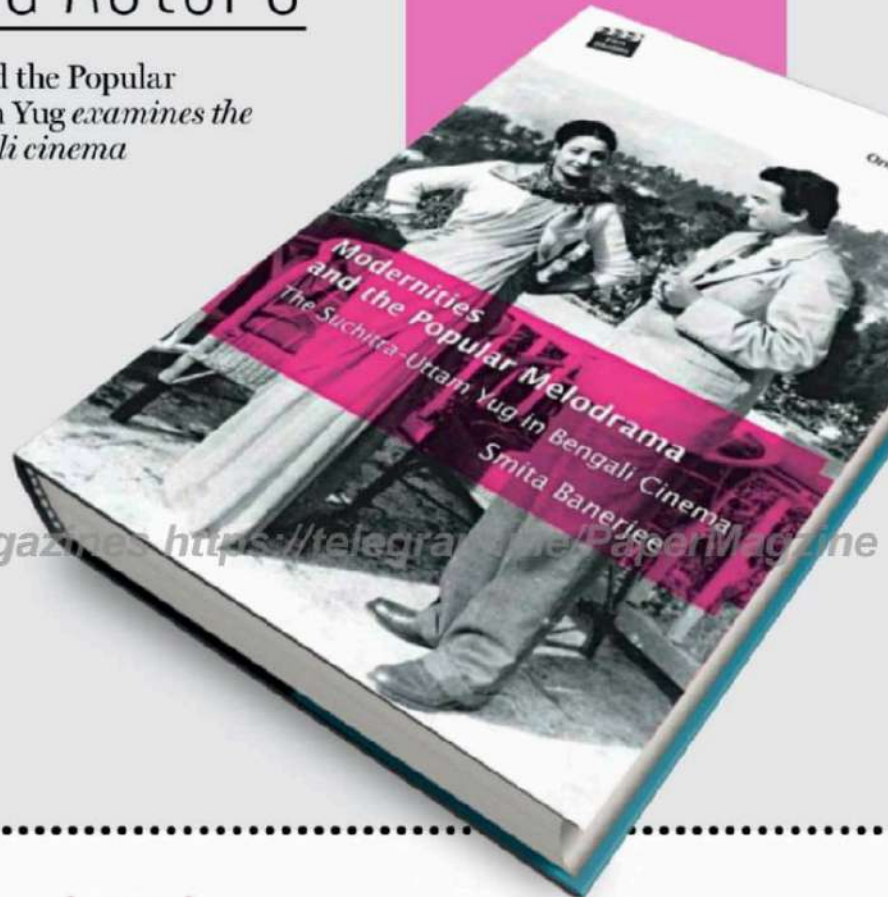
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**MODERNITIES AND THE
POPULAR MELODRAMA:**

The Suchitra-Uttam Yug
in Bengali Cinema

by *Smita Banerjee*

ORIENT BLACKSWAN

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films in the 1950s, most of them hits or superhits, their pairing lasted till the late 1970s and is called the Suchitra-Uttam yug (era) in this book.

This rich academic study explores a vast range of sources for how the 'star texts' of these two icons were formed—their films, detailed analyses of scenes, but also their off-screen behaviour, public responses to them, archival magazines, gossip, as well as the continued making of their legend after retirement and death. It studies how the modern Bengali bhadralok imagined themselves through these stars, not just via the fandom but also via the censorious responses of the public, critics and the 'art film' circuit.

Suchitra-Uttam (she asked for and got top billing in their films) brought in a fresh, liberating energy to the screen; just watch *Saptapadi's* 'Ei poth jodi' with the luminous pair on a motorbike. Their characters were often urban middle-class doctors, medical students, teachers, architects and such aspirational professions. They depicted ethical love but also delivered a new kind of erotic charge. Though they were married to other people, publicity hinted at their romance with phrases like 'Suchitra-Uttam Leela' and 'Ugr Pranay' (aggressive love).

Even as the stars were objects of desire for their fandom, the anxieties of the bhadralok were played out on their films, especially on the

body of Suchitra Sen via discussions of her onscreen "excesses", glamour, willingness to be photographed in daring poses (with 'no kiss' written on her face!), or what was perceived as her disproportionate remuneration. Responses to their onscreen physical intimacy ("lustful expressions" in *Sagarika*, "cheap sex appeal", "commercialisation") were all directed at the actress. This is not how a bhadramahila would behave!

The book also examines some of Sen's films as 'the lonely bhadramahila' (*Saat Pake Bandha*, *Uttar Phalguni*), and Uttam's roles as the elder-brother figure of Bengal (*Jadu Bangsha*, *Nagar Darpane*). In the background of the turbulent Naxal years, his films depicted the grave figure of Uttam grappling with the anger and frustration of Bengali youth that was no longer 'bhadra' in its expression. 'Afterlives' deals with how the stardom of Suchitra and Uttam continues to be cultivated via biographies, exhibitions, television...

and offers a critical examination of nostalgia. The image of Suchitra Sen as a Garbo-like recluse, a *sadhika* (god-loving renunciate), a *bandhobi* (friend) placing a garland on Uttam's dead body, lives on. Even as I write this, a new release, *Oti Uttam*, centres itself around the star, integrating shots from 56 old films. The yug has not quite ended. ■

—Juhi Saklani

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