***Paper***

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# Performing Democracy?
# A Contemporary Bengali Film and the Political Imagination

*Pradhan (2023)*

**Abstract:**

My paper reads a contemporary Bengali film through the frameworks of political imagination, populism and performative democratic politics. *Pradhan (2023)*, a Bengali film starring Bengal's well-known star, Dev, is what I am taking in for my analysis. Situating the film within the broader crisis of Bengali cinema and the shifting political culture of the state, the paper engages with the decline of left cultural formations, the rise of populist politics, and the consolidation of affective regimes of governance under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, TMC. While earlier trends in Bengali cinema were marked by nostalgia and bhadralok sensibilities, *Pradhan* signals a movement toward a populist cinematic form where sovereignty and democratic politics are personalised, mobilised and performed. By analysing the film, where the narrative is of a cop drama, which involves a cop who fights with the evils of a society and tries to perform and restore justice and democracy, I want to highlight the symptoms of the film's narrative structure, star persona, and its staging of elections, law, and justice. The paper argues that *Pradhan* exemplifies a contemporary mode of "performative democracy" politics in the light of Bengali cinema and the political imagination of Bengal.

## Contemporary Debates

Contemporary debates about Bengali cinema are always about how the industry, film culture and the reception are declining. And, one really cannot escape this position. While a lot of productive work is happening across India, Bengali cinema's crisis is a reality that affects film cultures, audiences and the Bengali imagination. Obviously, the ongoing crisis is a historical phenomenon, linked to the deep crisis of the State (of West Bengal), and much critical literature has been produced on it. For example, one of the symptoms of Bengali cinema in the second decade of the new millennium is the politics of nostalgia and the proliferation of the (New) Bhadrolok ideology. Meheli Sen's analysis of politics has been fruitful; she examines the *Ray-Movie* as the main phenomenon of the latest films by Kaushik Ganguly, Srijit Mukherjee, Rituparno Ghosh, and others. Since Ray-Nostalgia has spread throughout Bengali cinema—Standing in 2024—and Ray, Ghatak, and Sen have all merged into its politics of nostalgia, this critical examination is more crucial than ever. *Aparajito (2023)* by Anik Dutta and *Avijatrik (2021)* by Subhrajit Mitra are two examples of how not only the figures but also the films' narratives have been reimagined, and how these trends manage to escape the socio-political reality of West Bengal. Another crisis of the cinema in Bengal is about the narrative old-age weepies. Those films (for example, *Belasheshe (2015)*) excavate the sentimental value of old-age parental figures and their anxieties. It's not a crisis, but it's a very important symptom of the times. Again, in line with the bhadrolok and middle-class aspirations.

Moving away from the situation in cinema, the State of Bengal itself finds itself in a state of chaos and crisis under hyper-globalised, new-mediated, and right-wing politics. While the paper's objective is not to analyse the 'crisis' of the state, nor the industry and cinema, for it cannot even be grasped in a single paper. A look into the political history of Bengal is also needed. A postcolonial state in line with the Republic of India, West Bengal saw some of the harshest catastrophes in history: the 1947 partition, the 1971 refugee crisis and the deep, long economic crisis of the state. The left front ruled the state for 34 years, in a democratic, electoral manner. But in the 21st century, after the first decade, we see the historic defeat of the left and a decrease in left culture. Mamata, with her charisma and a new surge of popular politics, populism (Laclau, 2005; Partha Chatterjee, 2019), and mass movements, now rules the state.

Brinda Bose and Prasanta Chakravarty wrote about the turning points following the Left's historical defeat in Bengal. Their analysis foregrounds the cultural contours amid the changes in a living, uncertain city. A lot has already changed since the paper was published. The TMC regime is in its third government, while looking forward to the fourth. Populist democratic politics and the affective regimes of political reasoning have a strong hold on the manifestation of power and politics. Electoral democracy is still the high point, but its legitimacy is in question. The political imagination needs to be further explicated.

Within this historicization and the current state of Bengali cinema, the paper tries to understand and critically engage with

the political imaginary and contemporary socio-political aspects of Bengal and Bengali cinema. How the popular and affective politics of this regime have been translated into a film. For that understanding, I will analyse a contemporary Bengali film, *Pradhan (Avijit Sen, 2023)*, starring none other than one of Bengali cinema's homegrown stars and TMC politician, Dev. The film has a considerable amount of consolidation of popular politics, populism and the performative idea of sovereignty and democracy. But before I proceed with my analysis, I need to take a brief look at the film's actor/producer/politician, Dev.

## A Brief Look at the Star of the Film

Let me start with a look at Dev and his career. It will bring many factors into consideration. Dev started out in Bengali cinema as a young man who would stop at nothing to pursue passion and love. In some of his most well-known and enduring early flicks (also very commercially successful), he is either forced to elope to win his love *(Challenge, 2009)* or challenged to earn and show his love (*I Love You, 2007)*. A mix of romance, masculinity and ruralness characterises the early phase of his films. Quickly, we should note that the films that Dev was part of are almost always 'remakes'- again, an industrial factor, and the paper is leaving aside many such analyses that made these industrial factors important in the making of such products. But as Dev became a star and rose to fame, he reached those audiences in the Bengali Cinema that are seldom reached upon– the subalterns and mofussils. The second phase of Dev could be explained by the way his own fame and popularity emerged, requiring him to perform. He remade his early blockbusters, like *Challenge 2 (2014)*, as well as films that retain the mainstream, rural and massy flavour, along with musical and song-and-dance elements.

A rapid change comes with Dev when he starts to produce. Regarding the question of venturing into production, Dev has openly claimed that producing for him was becoming necessary, as he couldn't do justice to himself as an actor and to the stories that Bengali cinema needed. After the beginning of DEV [Dev Entertainment Ventures], Dev started producing and acting in some genres that, according to him, have hardly seen the light of day in Bengali cinema, such as *Cockpit (2017)* or *Kabir (2018)*, one an aviation thriller, another a terrorist film which takes on a single ride through a train.

On the other hand, one has to keep in mind that Dev is a politician. After the historic political change in West Bengal in 2011, TMC [Trinamool Congress] has been a major proponent of new mass movements, popular sovereignty and political performances in the State, with its chief leader, Mamata Banerjee, as a cult leader. Part of TMC's move was to infiltrate the Popular movement in Bengal, and Dev was a major figure in doing so; he entered politics and became an MP from his ancestral place, Ghatal. Without further elaboration on the direct or indirect connection between Dev and TMC, the paper seeks to understand Dev from a cinematic vantage point while taking into account the notions of politics and society. Because, as much as his political career can be analysed, it remains in the realm of the practical and empirical, while cinema can

offer insights into the Imaginary and the collective desire of a given society. Even if we look at Dev's personal position and take into consideration his subjective position, if he had become an MP in 2014 and cut to 2024, he would already have wanted to leave politics—yet Mamata and her party made sure Dev didn't retire. But the question here is Dev's motivation in his career in cinema and the industry, rather than his politics, as the questions we are dealing with concern mapping Dev as a cinema person (SV Srinivas, 2013), rather than his career in politics.

## The Political Field of *Pradhan (2023)*

*Pradhan (2023)*, directed by Avijit Sen, is close to three hours long and falls within the thriller and cop film genres. Pradhan is literally about a Pradhan (Panchayat Pradhan), which is a very basic political position in the rural structure of the town of Bengal. It also refers to the character's name, Dev, played by Deepak Pradhan. This is one of the film's many intertextual references, a strategy the narrative uses to play with different images of Dev and his identities. The film's story is about how a respectable teacher's (Jiban Krishna Sarkar played Paran Bandyopadhyay) life is turned upside down due to the political corruptness of the legal and political structures and systems of the small town and how Dev when he gets transferred to this local town, manages and acts to restore the faith, justice and order of this local town, both in the legal and political system. The Pradhan, or Jiban Krishna Sarkar, is played by Paran Bandyopadhyay, and his wife is played by Mamata Shankar. Dev is the police officer who is transferred to this local town and then witnesses the corruption and fractures in the system and structure. In a way, the film has two main protagonists: one, the political patriarch of Pradhan, whose redemption can again bring peace amid corruption and fractures; and two, the character of Dev, the modern police officer from Calcutta, who will restore the justice system.

The narrative mostly follows Dev (Deepak Pradhan) and features several major subplots. One of the major plots that holds the others is the narrative of Jiban Krishna Sarkar, an old, grumpy man who represses his idealism due to a past trauma and lives as an outcast. When Dev comes to the local town, he stays in the house of Jiban Krishna Sarkar. These are the film's many coincidental plots. Dev begins to understand the local town and meets the antagonist, Jatileshwar, the current Pradhan of the town—who tries to bribe Dev, as he does other police officers—but Dev, being the good cop, refuses. As the drama begins, Dev sets in order in many ways in the town, from inspecting a local school's food system to making the character Soham aware of a police officer's humanity and moral position. In the film's final acts, Dev does something that is the hallmark of democracy: he tries to conduct a free and fair election and ensures that the next Pradhan will be Jiban Krishna Sarkar. In this restoration of order, justice and political system, Dev brings everyone together to eliminate the antagonist, Jatileshwar– the crux of the broken system.

In the end, the outcast teacher becomes the town's Pradhan, restoring his dignity and respect. Dev now successfully moves on to another town as his mission here is done. The legal and political system of the small town is

restored by Dev's mission, which is not yet over; he's here to fix the broken system one by one. In light of the film's story and narrative, it's clear that it's a decisive marker of the way Dev produced and acted in cinema.

It is here that I want to stress. *Padhan* marks a certain consolidation of the state's political, social and contemporary realities. Other political factors include the performance of Democracy, Elections and Citizenship. Yet it's a highly contrived, idealistic drama. While the question of 'social' and 'reality' can be addressed through the film's narrative and form, the question of 'political' remains unclear.

However, what I want to address in the last part of the essay is the 'political' in connection to Dev, which I already mapped out earlier. Dev's political success is mainly attributed to his good humanism and political honesty. On the other hand, after he couldn't retire, a journalist asked him why he didn't retire. He simply replied he still believes in Democracy and the three pillars of *Democracy- the judiciary, Executive and Legislative*, while making a comment on why the *Media* should be the fourth pillar. All these exemplify my argument and critical analysis of the film. Firstly, it works with the star Dev, as he privileges a certain notion of politics. Secondly, the film portrays a certain electoral democratic politics in line with the popular and populist politics of today. Thirdly, in the light of contemporary Bengali cinema, it addresses questions of spectatorship, such as the performance of whose democracy and power. *Pradhan* is a good indicator of how to handle the current realities of West Bengal, the Cinema industry and the imagination of Bengali cinema. Or, it's a fantasy of restoration that retains the *form* of electoral democracy while emptying it of the contestation that gives democratic politics its substance.

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