CHAPTER V

EDUCATION AND MODERNITY OF WOMEN:
A STUDY OF BENGALI WOMEN

EDUCATION AND WOMEN IN POLITICS
Inequality is built into the structural matrices of the Indian society. Inequality between sexes is the reflection of such inbuilt, inegalitarian social structure. Unequal treatment meted out to the women is evident in every realm of life in society, economy and politics. Before the last quarter of the 19th century, discrimination between the two sexes relating to their political status was acute. Women in India had been totally insulated from politics. It was not fortuitous. They had been denied educational opportunities along with economic opportunities. They remained confined to the boundary of home and were accorded an inferior status in the
family. Naturally, they had no role in the political affairs of the country. The situation has, however, changed since then. Beginning from the late 19th century, women have been drawn into the vortex of national movement, followed by their participation in various political institutions and movements during the post-Independence period. Women have also achieved various political rights in free India. For example, women's political equality has been guaranteed by the system of adult franchise. They now have the equal right and freedom in shaping and sharing the Government. Their right of representation has at least opened the door for their entering into the male-world of political decision-making. In view of the fact that education has begun to spread among women in recent years, it will be interesting to examine if there is any relationship between education and politicization of women in India or any part thereof, leading to their modernity.

The present chapter attempts at such an exploration on a micro-level. Here, we propose to study the impact of education on the political status of Bengali women at two levels: viz, at the objective level and at the subjective level. First,

we attempt to demonstrate the extent, to which education has contributed to the prospect of women's entry into the political world. We also examine whether education does in any way raise the political status of women. Secondly, we attempt to ascertain the extent to which education has made them interested in and conscious about politics. We also explore the degree and kind of political participation to measure the level of their modernity in the political sphere.

We have gone through various books, periodicals and reports on the role and status of women in politics, in India, and also in West Bengal. But for this study, we have mainly concentrated on the empirical survey conducted by us. For the present chapter, we have also conducted an on-the-spot survey of the Burdwan University Students' Union election, held in 1984.

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Let us see to what extent education has made an impact on the prospect of women's entry into the political world. Both directly and indirectly, education is related to politicization of women in our society. Education raises the opportunities of women's entry into the world of politics, like their male counterpart. It inspires them to take part in politics through raising their political consciousness. Although, illiterate women in our society take part in politics, they hold
a superficial view of politics. Generally, they are guided by the local leaders. They cannot also assume positions of leadership and eminence in politics. Education makes the women aware of the larger socio-political world. It enables them to make a proper understanding about politics, to discriminate between what is right and what is wrong and to become self-conscious and active. It also gives the opportunities to become conversant with various political institutions and even to achieve high political statures.

Let us substantiate the correlation between education and politicization of women from the history of women's participation in India's struggle for freedom.

Women's participation in the fray of nationalist politics was preceded by, and, predicated upon two factors. First, the early 19th century social reform movements laid stress on changing the religious bases of certain evil practices and customs, and to apply rational and humanitarian criteria to women's problems like sati, widow remarriage and child marriage. The second factor was that from the mid-19th century onwards, the cause of female education was being championed. As a result of these two factors, by the end of the


3 Ibid.
19th century, a handful of women were exposed to education and new values and came forward to take part in politics, as part of their mission to bring about a change in the conditions of women. Education had made them conscious about the need for women's emancipation, not only from social, but also from political bondages. Thus we find that in 1889, Kadambini Ganguly, a graduate of Calcutta and the first woman to become a doctor, and Swarnakumari Devi, the first Indian woman editor of a Bengali journal, attended the fourth session of the Indian National Congress, at Bombay. Among the other women, present in this session, were Pandita Ramabai, Mrs. Shevanti-bai Trimbak, Mrs. Shantabai Nikambe, Mrs. Kashibai Kantikar and Miss Manekjee Cursetjee, all of whom developed into renowned educationists and social reformers. Mention may be made of a few early 20th century Bengali women like Renuka Ray and Lalita Ray, the students of Diocesan College, Calcutta, who gave up their studies and joined the non-cooperation movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The most renowned woman politician of this period, however, was Sarojini Naidu.

4 Ibid., pp.16-17.

who had taken politics as a vocation. Her dedication to the political movement was reflected in her election as President of the Congress in 1925, making her the first Indian woman to hold this office. During this time, she had clearly established herself as the most active and influential woman in the Indian political movement. All these indicate that the first genre of women politicians in Bengal and also in the rest of India came from the literate section of them.

It is to be noted that initially political awakening among women in India was confined largely to those with middle class background, namely, the professional, business and educated classes. From the 1920 onwards, women of all classes joined the national movement in large numbers. They were now being organized and led mostly by those educated women who happened to be students of colleges. In Bengal, Leela Roy, Beena Das, Kamala Dasgupta, Kamala Chatterjee, Manikuntala Sen, Kanak Dasgupta (Mukherjee) and Kalyani Mukherjee were among these.


student leaders.

Since Independence, political institutions and activities have affected every nook and corner of the Indian society. A competitive multi-party system, based on representative democracy and democratic decentralization of power, has emerged in India. Various ideologies are competing with one another for gaining mass support nationally, regionally or even locally. West Bengal is no exception in this regard. Women, constituting nearly half the total population of West Bengal, cannot be ignored especially in the context of the volatile political situation that prevails in this state. Needless to say that they are potentially capable of making or unmaking political regimes through the ballot. Thus, they are sought to be mobilized politically by different political parties and groups. Viewed in this context, the spread of education among Bengali women, however limited it might be, cannot but have an impact on the level of political consciousness and the intensity of political participation of women in West Bengal.

Although, it is difficult to establish any one-to-one correspondence between education and the prospect of Bengali women's entry into politics, in empirical terms, we may refer to various formal and informal aspects and processes of education through which Bengali women get exposed to the complex and conflicting world of politics, and decide about their course of action with regard to political participation. We also try to ascertain the extent of the contribution of education to raising the political status of Bengali women through their acquiring positions in different political power structures.

First, we examine the relationship between education and politics by analyzing the role of education as an agency of political socialization, from the vantage point of modern political sociology. Education is an excellent medium through which political culture can be transmitted to its recipients. Boys and girls adopt this culture in various educational institutions, viz, schools, colleges and universities. The degree of articulation and political mobilization of students varies from the lower level of education (schools) to the higher level (colleges, universities).”

Higher education disseminates political values, beliefs and consciousness among its recipients. As far as women are concerned, by virtue of receiving higher education, they become conscious about the conflicting worlds of politics and learn to make their own choices between and among competing political parties and ideologies. Quite often, the content and curricula of education contribute directly to the process of political socialization of women. More importantly, however, politicization is effected by the informal, implicit, often unconscious programmes in which students and teachers participate and exchange views. Debates, deliberations, campus-gossip, exchange of personal views and opinions — all may have a bearing on politicization of students, especially, of female students. Generally, women have no association outside the family. The educated women are exceptions. They get an opportunity to develop contact with a larger association through educational institutions which make women aware of the rapidly changing world around them and their place in it. They begin to question age-old values and practices, denying their rightful place in a male-dominated society. Hence, education, by raising their consciousness about various sorts of discrimination on the ground of sex, helps them to struggle for their upward mobility through the channels of politics.
For example, educated women were active in mobilizing support for the Hindu Code Bill, which was aimed at ameliorating the general status of Hindu women in the country. Women members of the Parliament and the State Legislative Assemblies, cutting across party lines, fought against the conservative Hindus. In West Bengal, they organized meetings, processions, and signature campaigns to arouse people's consciousness. Among the educated Bengali women who were active in various political parties and mass organizations, including women's organizations at this time, mention may be made of Manikuntala Sen, Renu Chakravarti, Pravabati Devi Saraswati, Renuka Ray and others. A similar political upsurge has been noticed among different sections of women recently over the passage of the controversial Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill in the Union Parliament. This time, however, different women's organizations, led by educated and politically conscious women, opposed the Bill as retrograde, as undermining the dignity and


11 This Bill reportedly curtails the right of divorcee Muslim women to get alimony from their husbands. It indirectly encourages the *Talag* which humiliates the position of Muslim women.
honour of Muslim women. In West Bengal, women leaders of various leftist parties and mass organizations have come forward to defend and safeguard the rights of Muslim women. A leftist students' organization also held a convention of girl students in Calcutta, opposing the bill, on 8 May, 1986. A number of girl students belonging to colleges and universities spoke at this convention. Such instances show that educated women have not fought shy of taking up the cause of women and launching political battles over the same.

The content of modern education, to some extent, makes its recipients conscious about the present socio-political system. Some disciplines like history, political science, sociology and economics, focus the attention of students on socio-economic realities. The crisis of the society is also reflected in the literature of social sciences. The humanities and social sciences, incorporating a vast range of critical and subversive literature on the contemporary problems of society, make one

14 Ibid., May 9, 1986.
15 By 'Subversive', Ralph Beals refers to those studies by means of which "established ideologies and assumptions upon which political decisions and actions are based, are questioned". Ralph Beals, Politics of Social Research, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1979, p.1.
think how these problems can be solved. Thus, educational process instils into the minds of pupils an awareness that they may also bring about changes in the present socio-economic structure through conscious and active intervention in the transformative process. Needless to point out, politics is the medium of such intervention.

It will not be irrelevant to cite here that a majority of women in India and also in West Bengal study Arts and Social Sciences. A few women receive science education. So we may say that since humanities and arts subjects directly contribute to political socialization and since women receive their education mostly in such subjects, education directly influences women's socialization into politics. From our survey of the educational background of most of the women members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly during 1952-1982, and women members of Parliament elected from West Bengal during the same period, we find that a majority of the higher educated among them have had their education in liberal arts subjects.¹⁶

¹⁶ Our findings are based on information concerning bio-data of women members of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, contained in the Who's Who: West Bengal Legislative Assembly, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, respectively.
The correlation between education and politics is clearly evident from the activities of Students' Union in the institutions of higher education. The students have got the right to protect and promote their interest through organizing students' unions. Since women receive higher education, they also take part in forming union. Like a boy, a girl also freely competes in the electoral process in the educational institutions. Thus, she can have the initial training for providing political leadership in future. It is not uncommon that students have been particularly active in electoral politics and have, occasionally, played a key role in precipitating political crises. It is for this reason that we find various political parties making efforts to penetrate into the student community by means of organizing students' movements under their politico-ideological banner. Students also come in contact with political leaders who may influence them to join various political parties in future. Educational system, has, thus, facilitated the process of political recruitment of the younger generation, both males and females. As P. John John

observes,

"To be a leader of the student union, getting publicity in the newspapers, securing public attention and political party's support, are considered to be creditable which many think would lead them to safe future career. The elder politicians have paved the way for the younger generation. More than seventy percent of the politicians at present started their political career in school unions. Many students built up a footing in school on which they have further political training while enrolled in colleges. Union activities have been the full time work for many students. Organizing agitations for various demands, writing wall posters, etc., are some of the full time work of some students in colleges. Some are successful in climbing up the ladder of state politics."\(^{18}\)

This is true of a few educated Bengali women who have become successful politicians after their student lives. We may cite the names of Arati Dasgupta, a member of the West Bengal State Committee of the CPI-M, Shyamali Gupta, Secretary of the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti (Women's Organization of the CPI-M) and Mamata Banerjee, a Member of the Parliament, belonging to the Congress-I, all of whom were actively engaged in student politics in the University of Calcutta\(^{19}\).

The impact of education on politicization of women can also be seen in this way. College and University education, for


\(^{19}\) This observation is based on the researcher's personal knowledge about these leaders.
some students, brings in new values and helps form more radi-
cal political attitudes. It is well-known that higher acade-
mic institutions have often been the scenes of political fac-
tionalism, or have launched political struggles\textsuperscript{20}. In recent
times, in India, particularly in West Bengal, Colleges and
Universities have been found to have fostered, among a sizea-
ble section of students, a militant political attitudes and a
love for confrontation with authorities\textsuperscript{21}. The Naxalite Move-
ment in West Bengal is a pointer to this. The Naxalite Movement
had its appeal mainly to students of Colleges and Universities\textsuperscript{22}.
The Bengali women, although very insignificant in number, were
involved in this movement.

Education, especially higher education, also makes an indirect
contribution towards politicization of women. By offering
opportunities of gainful employment, education exposes the
women to modern trade unionism and political processes accom-
panying the same. We have seen in Chapter 4 how educated
Bengali women are coming into the employment market. Quite
expectedly, they participate in trade union politics. We shall

\textsuperscript{22} Sumanta Banerjee, \textit{In the Wake of Naxalbari}, Subarnarekha,
analyze the nature and extent of their participation in trade union politics afterwards.

So far we have probed into various formal, informal, direct and indirect processes through which education motivates, encourages and promotes political participation of women. In what follows, we shall examine whether education has enabled women to come into different political power structures like Parliament, State Assembly, Council of Ministers, etc.

There is no denying that educated women have come to occupy prominent positions in the higher level of power and authority. In the Parliament, most of the women members are educated, though their levels vary. About 70-80% of women members of Parliament are better educated. This is equally applicable to most of the women members in the State Assembly of West Bengal. Bengali women, elected to the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and the West Bengal Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha) from 1952 to 1984, have been found to be more or less educated, with a few exceptions. A majority of them have received higher education, some having school level education, and a few others having been educated at home. Again, those few women who have become Ministers in West Bengal during the same period, also are found to be educated.

23 Who's Who: Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, West Bengal Legislative Assembly.
Let us see the extent of participation of women from West Bengal in Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha), West Bengal Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha), and in the different ministries of West Bengal during the post-Independence period.

First, we see the position of women of West Bengal in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. They have been represented in both the Houses from 1952 to 1984. But their number has remained insignificant throughout. We find that the maximum number of women, elected from West Bengal to the Lok Sabha, was only five out of a total of 42 members from this State, in 1984. Again, West Bengal had only one woman out of its 36 representatives in the Lok Sabha, in 1952, and one out of 40, in 1971 (See Table 1). In the Rajya Sabha, West Bengal had one woman among its 14 representatives in 1952. The corresponding figures were one out of 16 in 1957, 1962, 1967, 1972, respectively, two in 1976 and three in 1980. In 1984, the number has again come down to one.

Secondly, we see the position of women in West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The number of women, elected to the Assembly...

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Table 1. Women Elected to the Lok Sabha from West Bengal during 1952-84 in Proportion to the Total Number of Seats Allotted to West Bengal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

varied between 14 in 1962 and 4 in 1977. It is significant that the total number of seats had actually increased from 240 to 294, while the representation of women decreased. (See Table 2).

Thus it appears from the above reference that women of West Bengal have found a very poor representation in different Legislative bodies.

The situation is no different in case of women's participation in various ministries in West Bengal. There was not a single woman in the ministry for the western part of Bengal when the first ministry was formed in July 1947. After the first general elections of 1952, when Congress party formed the government, Renuka Ray was the first woman included as a Cabinet Minister in the new ministry. In this ministry, two women were also appointed Deputy Ministers, one of whom was dropped after a reshuffle of the ministry. After the general elections of 1957, no woman was included as a Cabinet Minister. There were two women in this ministry, one was included as Deputy Minister and the other was appointed a Minister of State. After the third general elections, in the ministry of 1962, women's position had slightly improved. For the first time, two women had held Cabinet ranks and three women became Deputy Ministers. But after two years, the posts of the Deputy
Table 2. Women Elected to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly during 1952-82 in Proportion to Total Number of Seats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Seats</th>
<th>Number of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>11 (One elected in a by-election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>14 (One elected in a by-election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>6 (One elected in a by-election)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ministers were not continued. Hence, only two women remained in the ministry. It is noteworthy that from 1957 to 1966, a woman had held the post of the Governor of West Bengal. In 1967, when a non-Congress United Front Government was formed for the first time in West Bengal, no woman was included in the ministry. During the term of the Second United Front Government, one woman held the rank of Cabinet Minister, and another was a Minister of State. In the short-lived Government of 1971, West Bengal, again, got a ministry without any woman in it. In 1972, only one woman was included as a Deputy Minister in the 28 member Congress ministry. We find that women of West Bengal have been poorly represented in all the ministries since 1947. The share of women in ministerial offices in West Bengal has also declined over the years. It should be pointed out that as far as women's participation in ministries in West Bengal is concerned, the record


of 1962 has remained unsurpassed till date.

It is to be noted that the expansion of education could not create favourable objective conditions with regard to the entry of a larger number of women of West Bengal into the highest levels of political power and authority.

With regard to our subject of discussion, i.e., the impact of education on politicization of women of West Bengal, we now turn our attention to the position of women in different political parties in this state.

The major political parties in West Bengal admit, at least, theoretically, that there should be no discrimination between men and women in matters of politics. But they do not deny that the discrimination is there, and, for them, the abolition of sex-discrimination is a problem. However, the approach to the problem of sex-discrimination of the different political parties is not similar.

We may note in this connection that most of the political parties in West Bengal are branches of broader party structures, and, therefore, the views expressed by the parties in West Bengal on the problems of women are more or less similar to those held by the party branches outside the state.27

All the major political parties in West Bengal demand for equality between men and women in their election manifestos. The Congress party emphasizes women's education and employment opportunities. But women's place in this party is not satisfactory. According to the figures available up to the early 1970s, only about 18% of the primary members of the Congress in West Bengal were women. But most of them were inactive. In the state executive of the party, there were only two women out of a total of 30. The CPI demands equal pay for equal work and the removal of all restrictions and discriminations against women in employment, education and social laws. But women in this party did not comprise more than 3% of its total membership even in the 1970s. The State Council of the CPI had six women members out of a total of 70, up to that time. Women's position in this party is not impressive.

During the early 1970s, women constituted about 3% of the total membership of the CPI-M in West Bengal (500 out of 16000). Total membership of the party has since gone up to 136,980, as reported in 1985. The number of women has also increased by several thousands. But the increase is insignificant in percentage terms. The position of women in the party hierarchy is also not satisfactory. The State Committee of the party includes only three women out of 87 elected in December, 1985. There was
no woman member either in West Bengal State Committee or in the Central Committee of the CPI-ML. There were, however, some women in the Party Committees at the lower levels. The SUCI, another small left party in West Bengal, has a large women following, but its provincial committee had only one woman member, according to information available up to the early 1970s.28

The position of women in various political parties has not improved much even today. In this context, it may be appropriate to cite the observation that political parties use women "both as instruments of campaign and objects (women's welfare) set forth for achievement".29 A veteran woman politician has expressed her reaction more succinctly in the

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following words:

"Where women are activised in politics, they are utilised in mobilising women's support for the party they belong to. Their objective is success of the party. Women's role as women in the political web is totally ignored. One hardly sees women asserting their personalities as political entities ..., and not be content doing a supportive role"30

It is clear that educated Bengali women have not been able to break the tradition of male-supremacy within the party hierarchy. It is no new development that most women, who are politically conscious, show much desire to win a place in political leadership, but the great majority of them accept the system of justification invented by men to rationalize their standing aside from it31.

In order to examine the political status of women, the role and position of women in trade unions should also be discussed. Although, the employed and educated women join the trade unions, their place in trade unions is far from satisfactory. There are numerous registered trade unions in our country. But none of those specifically caters to the needs of women32.

most of the professions or industries, the number of male-workers is high. The number of female workers is very low. Hence a large majority of trade union members are drawn from the menfolk. It is commonly observed that women are less active and enthusiastic trade unionists than men. Fewer women are trade union members, fewer women who are members participate in trade union activities, and even fewer still are in positions of leadership in trade unions.\(^3^3\) Kum. Maniben Kara, Chand Bibi, Dr. Maitreyi Bose are a few names who held the position of trade union leadership. As a result, women play a negligible role in the decision making process in the union.

Another feature of trade union politics in West Bengal, as in the rest of India, is that women's special interests are bypassed by the male leadership of the union. The unions do not touch the crucial and primary work area of women, i.e., their household activities. They do not fight for special benefits and allowances (creche allowances, maternity benefits, paternity leave, etc.), which employed housewives may rightly deserve.\(^3^4\) They do not take care of the special


\(^3^4\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 341.
problems and hindrances, working women have to fight against. For example, the trade unions have not shown much interest in abolishing discriminatory recruitment policies based on sex or fighting out sexual harassment of women in the work place. Nor have trade union leaders tried seriously to increase training facilities for women. They have also not made much efforts in mobilizing women to assert their legal and constitutional rights, as admitted by most of the trade union leaders.

In a study on 'politicization of women in West Bengal', its author has pointed out that trade unions have not always succeeded in helping women, working in the organized sector, to link up their narrow economic activities with wider political issues. Thus, we find that despite education, working women have not been sufficiently politicized through participation in trade union activities. They have also not always succeeded in improving their objective condition, both in and outside the working place.

35 Ibid.
In other words, education has failed to create consciousness among employed women which can effect a change in the composition, power structure and value-orientation of trade unions fully in accordance with the principle of male-female parity.

Let us now briefly enumerate some of the factors which stand in the way of women's coming into the political sphere. The lesser political power and influence exerted by women as a class, compared to men, has, perhaps, less to do with their sex, but more with their social situation. The theoretical implication of this is very simple: till such time women as a class are custodians of the private or the familial sphere, they occupy the apolitical end of the political-apolitical continuum. In the prevailing pattern of division of labour in society, women are condemned to remain absorbed in the relatively apolitical sphere of social life. Educated and employed women may come in contact with the larger socio-political world outside home but here again, their being wives and mothers, brings in the constraints of the dual commitments at home and the working place. After meeting such commitments which eat into much of their time and energy, they are least likely to develop any interest in, or live contact with, politics.

In this context, it is to be noted that modern politics has become highly competitive. Building up a political career entails a process of intense competition among the aspirants. One has to spend considerable amount of time and energy to move high up on the political ladder. Women can hardly afford to have the time and energy for political activities after meeting their commitments at home. Due to economic necessity, the male members may accept the role of educated women as breadwinners which keep them away from home for a while, but with few honourable exceptions, they are most reluctant to accept women's spending time away from home for political activities. In such an atmosphere, not too many educated women come forward to play an active part in politics. Those few who come, are often outpaced by their male counterparts.

The lack of women's economic self-sufficiency is also responsible for the lower involvement of women into political power structures. Politics in this country is status and money-oriented. Contesting the election, for having an access to political power, is becoming increasingly expensive day-by-day.

Women are naturally more handicapped than men in meeting such high expenses. They have hardly the means to mobilize funds for contesting an election. The family is least likely to encourage its women members to make such a venture, though it may do so for the men. Ultimately then, a politically conscious and active woman who aspires for representation in any elective body will have to look forward to the backing and patronage of a political party. And as has been noted by many, political parties are not very generous in bestowing favour upon their women followers 40.

We see further that family background, more than education, determines the levels of political participation of women in West Bengal or in India as a whole. Women whose relatives have a prominent place in the political arena, can enter into positions of political power and authority 41. But here also, if there are male contenders for family patronage, women are least likely to be favoured. One may conjecture what Jawaharlal Nehru would have done in case he had a son. Leaving aside such distinguished families with political background, we find


41 S.D. Muni observes in connection with a number of women contesting for Lok Sabha seats that most of them come either from families which were in the "thick of politics", or they "were drawn into politics through relations or close associates under whose protection and guidance they often worked", S.D. Muni, Op.cit., pp.40-41.
that most of the families do not support the involvement of women, even educated women, in politics.

The other factor, which keeps many women away from exercising political power, is the threat of violence. Many legislators and political workers, who have a long record of political activism, still hesitate to face candidature at elections.

Women's inadequate representation in higher positions of authority has also resulted from inadequate attention, paid to political education and mobilization of women, by both political parties and women's organizations. The structures of the parties make them male-dominated, and, inspite of outstanding exceptions, most of the party men are not free from the sub-conscious attitude of masculine superiority. As a result, we find that a few women get party nominations for contesting elections to various representative bodies.

We, therefore, come across a very complex pattern of relationship between education and the levels of women's participation in political processes and power structures. Education opens up new vistas before women to make their presence

43 Ibid., p.301.
felt at the corridors of political power, and also arouses in them political consciousness, and an urge, in some, for acquiring political power. But the new opportunities created by the spread of education go begging in the male-dominated society, permeated by a patriarchal ideology. Lack of economic self-sufficiency, prevailing division of labour between the two sexes, constraints of the dual role of working women (especially, wives and mothers), latent or manifest male-chauvinism of most of the political parties and organizations, and various other factors offset the positive impact of education.

III

We now present, analytically, the findings of our empirical survey relating to the impact of education on women's attitude to politics. In order to gauge the extent of the educated women's interest in politics, we have studied the attitude of 200 Bengali women towards politics, taking 100 each from the districts of Calcutta and Burdwan. In order to examine whether higher educated women's value-orientation differs from that of lower educated women, we have included both higher educated and lower educated respondents in this study.
It is assumed that awareness of, and interest and involvement in political affairs, lead to women's modernity. Hence, the findings of our survey, we believe, may indicate the extent, to which educated Bengali women have approached modernity in their attitudes, value-orientations and mental make-ups.

The respondents are asked seven pointed questions relating to their political awareness, their perception of the role, they can play in politics, and also their motivation to, and level of articulation, concerning political issues and activities. For example, they are asked whether they support a political party, read political literature, approve of women's participation in politics, take interest in political meetings, campaigns, etc. They are also asked whether they would like to build up a new organization of their own to solve various local problems. Our findings, pertaining to each specific question, are recorded in separate tables presented herein.

Let us evaluate the influence of education on women's value-orientation/attitude with regard to politics. Scanning the responses of our respondents, we find that higher education makes women interested in politics. 57% of higher educated respondents are inclined to discuss politics with friends or relatives. Out of 50 higher educated respondents, drawn from Calcutta, 30 (60%) are so inclined. For Burdwan, the
corresponding figure is 27 (54%). Some lower educated respondents, i.e., 44% are interested in discussing politics. Out of 50 respondents in this category, living in Calcutta, 23 (46%) are so interested. Out of 50 lower educated respondents, drawn from Burdwan, 21 (42%) like to discuss politics with friends or relatives. (See Table 3).

Although, a majority of higher educated respondents have interest in discussing politics, 43% of them do not even like to talk about politics. They intentionally avoid the discussion of politics. Regarding this question, we find some differences between the value-orientation of higher educated and that of lower educated respondents. A majority of lower educated respondents, i.e., 56% (54% in Calcutta and 58% in Burdwan) dislike the discussion of politics.

Regarding the question, whether women should participate in solving some local problems through forming a new organization, an overwhelming majority of our respondents acknowledge in unequivocal terms that they prefer to participate in such organization. 49, out of 50 higher educated respondents of Calcutta show such preference. In Burdwan, similar responses are given by 100% of the higher educated respondents. In this regard, we do not notice any significant difference in the attitude of lower educated women. Out of 50 lower educated
Table 3. Distribution of Respondents' Attitude to Discussing Politics with Friends or Relatives, According to District, and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Liking to discuss politics</th>
<th>Not so liking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>30 (60%)</td>
<td>20 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
<td>23 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>23 (46%)</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>21 (42%)</td>
<td>29 (58%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
women residing in Calcutta, 45 (90%) respond positively and the corresponding figure for Burdwan is 48 (96%) (See Table 4).

The response pattern here is similar, irrespective of educational level and area of our survey. It shows that educated Bengali women want to involve themselves outside the family, although in local areas, if necessary, by forming some organizations and participating in those in order to solve some local problems. Needless to say, such participatory orientation has an indirect bearing on politicization of women.

A significant minority of higher educated respondents, i.e., 44% are inclined to attend political meetings. A majority of them, i.e., 56% express their unwillingness to attend meetings. Out of 50 higher educated women of Calcutta, 21 (42%) like to attend political meetings. The corresponding figure for Burdwan is 23 (46%). The percentage of lower educated women who like to attend political meetings is still lower. Out of 50 lower educated respondents, residing in Calcutta, 15 (30%) want to go to political meetings, while in Burdwan, out of 50 respondents, belonging to this category, 17 (34%) are willing to attend political meetings (See Table 5).

Here, it may be said that many of the higher educated Bengali women do not want to come into the forefront of politics. In
Table 4. Distribution of Respondents' Attitude Towards Forming A New Organization for Solving the Local Problems, According to District and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents</th>
<th>Not so willing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49 (98%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>45 (90%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48 (96%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
Table 5. Distribution of Respondents' Attitude towards Attending Political Meetings, According to District and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Liking to attend political meetings</td>
<td>Not so liking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>21 (42%)</td>
<td>29 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23 (46%)</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
<td>35 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17 (34%)</td>
<td>33 (66%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
other words, higher education has failed to change the mental make-up of women adequately in this direction. However, the percentage of higher educated women who want to attend political meetings is higher than that of lower educated women. Hence, we may say that higher education has, to some extent, contributed to politicizing women.

The percentage of respondents, having a positive disposition towards active political participation, is very low. Out of 100 higher educated respondents, only 22 want to engage themselves in any activity during a political campaign, to elect some candidates. Out of 50 higher educated women living in Calcutta, only 12 (24%) show an urge for active political participation. In Burdwan, the corresponding figure is 10, i.e., 20%. Lower educated women do not also want to involve themselves in direct political activities. In Burdwan, out of 50 respondents belonging to this category, 8 (16%) show an urge for direct participation in politics. The response pattern is similar in case of lower educated women of Calcutta (See Table 6).

It seems that Bengali women, irrespective of their levels of education, have developed a sort of apathy or aversion to direct participation in political activities. Education has brought about changes in the attitudes of a small number of
Table 6. Distribution of Respondents' Attitude to Engaging in any Activity during a Political Campaign, According to District, and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents liking to engage in any activity during a political campaign</th>
<th>Not so liking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12 (24%)</td>
<td>38 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10 (20%)</td>
<td>40 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
<td>43 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8 (16%)</td>
<td>42 (84%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
women who seem to be willing to make politics their pre-
occupation.

Majority of our respondents, with different levels of educa-
tion, admit that they support one political party or another.
Out of 50 higher educated respondents in Calcutta, 30 (60%)
are supporters of one political party or another. For Burdwan,
the corresponding figure is 36 (72%). Out of 50 lower educa-
ted respondents in Calcutta, 29 (58%) support one political
party or another. Out of 50 respondents of Burdwan, belonging
to this category, 33 (66%) are positively committed to any
political party (See Table 7).

Here, the respondents' levels of education do not cause any
difference in their response patterns, as far as the question
of supporting a political party is concerned. It is also to
be noted that a significant minority of higher educated res-
pondents (40% in case of Calcutta and 28% in case of Burdwan),
are not inclined to support any political party at all. This
may be explained by the fact that our non-supporting respon-
dents are apathetic to all existing political parties, al-
though, they need not necessarily be politically unconscious.

Now, we see how far education has facilitated women's exposure
to mass media (newspaper, radio, television or either of these,
Table 7. Distribution of Respondents’ Attitude towards Supporting a Political Party, According to District, and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Not support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30 (60%)</td>
<td>20 (40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36 (72%)</td>
<td>14 (28%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>29 (58%)</td>
<td>21 (42%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33 (66%)</td>
<td>17 (34%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
as available to the respondents), for collecting information about political affairs. An overwhelming majority of higher educated respondents use mass media for collecting information about politics. 76% of them in Calcutta and 70% in Burdwan, have aptitude for knowledge about political affairs. 46% of the lower educated respondents in Calcutta and 36% of them in Burdwan, collect information about political affairs from the various mass media, available to them. (See Table 8).

Here, we find that higher educated women are more exposed to mass media than their lower educated counterparts. They are also in a better position to use various sources of information about politics. However, a small section of them, residing in both Calcutta and Burdwan, do not show much interest about political affairs. They use mass media mostly for non-political purposes, as they told us in the course of our interviews with them.

Many of our higher educated respondents read political literature occasionally. The number of women, belonging to this category, who read political literature regularly is minimal. Only 8% of the higher educated respondents of Calcutta and 4% of those of Burdwan are interested in reading political literature regularly. Of the higher educated respondents, 68% in Calcutta, and 60% in Burdwan assert that they read political
Table 8. Distribution of Responses to the Question of Using Mass Media for Collecting Information about Political Affairs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Collecting information about political affairs through mass media</th>
<th>Not collecting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38 (76%)</td>
<td>12 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35 (70%)</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23 (46%)</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18 (36%)</td>
<td>32 (64%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Respondents 200
literature occasionally. 24% of them in Calcutta and 36% in Burdwan state that they do not read political literature at all. Among the lower educated women living in Calcutta and Burdwan, none reads political literature regularly. Out of 50 lower educated respondents drawn from Calcutta, only 22% are interested in reading political literature occasionally. The corresponding figure for Burdwan is 14% (See Table 9).

Here, we find that higher education has induced a majority of women to reading political literature, at least occasionally. Higher educated women are more interested than their lower educated counterparts, in reading political literature. But higher education has not generated in them, the habit of reading political literature regularly. Through supplementary queries, we found that the respondents were not serious about reading political literature. Higher educated women, despite getting the opportunities for reading political literature, do seldom keep them conversant with the same. In case of lower educated women, access to such literature may be difficult. But on the whole, our findings confirm the belief that despite education, Bengali women are not seriously preoccupied with politics.

Women with differential levels of education are found to approve, in overwhelming numbers, of women's participation
Table 9. Distribution of Responses to the Question Whether the Respondents Read Political Literature (Books, Journals, Pamphlets), According to District, and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading political literature regularly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading occasionally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not reading at all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>34 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>30 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>11 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in politics. Particularly, the higher educated respondents are favourably disposed towards such participation. Out of 50 higher educated respondents in Calcutta, 43 (86%) approve of women's participation in politics. The corresponding figure for Burdwan is 40 (80%). Out of 50 lower educated respondents in Calcutta, 28 (56%) support women's participation in politics. The response pattern in case of Burdwan is similar (See Table 10).

Thus we note that higher education has made women conscious about their eligibility in regard to participation in politics. They now, no longer regard politics as the exclusive preoccupation of the menfolk. Here the percentage of higher educated women, in comparison with that of lower educated ones is higher. Our findings confirm the belief that education, especially higher education, has awakened women about their role in politics.

From our survey, it is clear that the higher educated women are politically more conscious than the lower educated women. But such consciousness does not necessarily led them to be politically active. A majority of them prefer to keep safe distance from politics. Another finding which is of special interest is that both the respondents who have interest in
Table 10. Distribution of Respondents' Attitude Towards Women's Participation in Politics, According to District, and Level of Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Number and percentage of respondents</th>
<th>Not approving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Approving women's participation in politics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43 (86%)</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40 (80%)</td>
<td>10 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>28 (56%)</td>
<td>22 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower educated</td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27 (54%)</td>
<td>23 (46%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
active participation in politics, and, those who have no such interest, are willing to take part in solving local problems through forming new organizations. It implies that Bengali women, with higher and lower levels of education alike, are alert to those problems which affect their lives and are willing to take initiative to solve those. Furthermore, women want to live within the known environment. They want to engage themselves in solving local problems, in addition to meeting their domestic responsibilities. A majority of respondents want to get closer to the immediate social realities affecting their day-to-day lives, but refuse to be drawn into the larger political arena.

We also find that women's attitude to politics does not depend so much on rural-urban differentials as on the differential levels of education. We do not come across any significant difference in the attitudes of educated women residing in Calcutta, which has no rural respondent, and Burdwan, which has both rural and urban respondents. Thus, we may conclude that education is a more powerful agency than the rural-urban setting, in politicizing women.

Now we will present our findings relating to our interview with some post-graduate female students which had been conducted during Burdwan University Students' Union election held
in 1984. 25 respondents were asked three questions concerning politics: a) whether they cast their vote out of conscious political choice, b) whether higher education encourages them to take part in political activities and c) whether higher education they receive, has an impact on their political attitudes.

We find from this survey that higher education has aroused in women, an awareness of politics. It is also found that higher education, as imparted to them in the university, is positively related to their political orientation. But higher education has not succeeded in making them interested in active participation in political activities. Out of 25 respondents, 15 higher educated women participated in the Students' Union election, through exercising their voting right, out of political consciousness, or because of their belief in a particular political ideology. An overwhelming majority of them, 19 (76%), considered that higher education they were receiving, had an impact on their political attitude. Only 8 of them felt that higher education had encouraged them to participate in political activities. (See Table 11).

From the analysis of the data we have collected through this empirical survey, two contradictory tendencies are noticed in the higher education-politicization correlation. Here also
Table 11. Attitude of Post-Graduate Female Students of The University of Burdwan, to Politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total Respondents 25</th>
<th>Number and percentage of affirmative responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Exercising voting right out of political consciousness</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Higher education they receive, having an impact on their political attitude</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Higher education encouraging women in direct political activities</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
we observe that higher education has influenced the orientation of thinking of the respondents relating to politics. It has made a majority of them politically conscious. But it has not motivated them towards active political participation.

From both the surveys, we find that although, education politicizes a few women who are willing to involve themselves in politics, their number is so small that it hardly enables them to exert their influence in politics. This has been indicated in the first section of our study. We may say that education makes our women passive participants in politics.

Why have a majority of educated Bengali women been passive participants in politics? We may explain this in terms of several factors. First, the uncertainties, ruggedness and whirlpools of politics deter them from active political participation. Secondly, lack of faith in the present political system keeps many women away from direct involvement in politics. In a study on women voters' attitude in West Bengal, 25% of the respondents reportedly stated that having votes would not help women and even men. About 8% of them stated that they would not vote on principle, since it did not help them in any way. Others preferred disengagement because of lack of inspiring political leadership. Thirdly,

the prevalence of corruption and inefficiency in politics, has alienated them from active political field\textsuperscript{46}. Many educated women who are critical about the existing state of political affairs around them, but lacking courage and confidence to question the same, prefer passivity to activism in politics. Fourthly, women are turned passive participant in politics through their early socialization in the family which makes them generally submissive and tolerant. As they come face to face with political realities at a mature age, given their mental attributes, women, even educated women, prefer withdrawal from politics to confronting it.

Now, we may mention two important factors, the absence of which accounts for the relative indifference of educated Bengali women to politics. The first factor is an all-embracing political goal, like national liberation, which attracted women - rich or poor, literate or laity alike - to join the mass political upsurges of the pre-Independence period. The absence of such an overriding goal may be one of the major reasons for the currently indifferent attitude towards politics among "young women, even when they are highly educated and widely read", in West Bengal\textsuperscript{47}.


The second factor is the symbiosis between social reforms (especially those relating to women's conditions in society) and politics which characterized pre-Independence days and also the first few years after Independence. Politics was more meaningful a pursuit for many educated women as it had a direct bearing on their objective conditions of life. The divorce, since then, between social problems that affect women directly, and the political process, is one of the major causes of women's disinterest in direct participation in politics. The absence of an active women's movement and the failure of political parties and organizations to mobilize women for the solution of their problems have prevented women from exerting adequate pressure on political institutions. For example, all political parties speak volumes against the dowry system, but even in West Bengal, known for its political militancy and activism, no significant political movement has been organized by any of the recognized political parties to eradicate this social evil, directly affecting the lives of most of the Bengali women. It is an irony that the Communist Party of India (CPI), founded about 60 years back, had only recently to declare in public that

49 Ibid., pp.109-110.
any of its members accepting dowry in marriage would be thrown out of the party. Most of the political parties, radical and conservative alike, have failed to organize the 'Indian women's battle for freedom'. Excepting a few occasions, they could not come together, cutting across political-ideological barriers, to protect and promote the interests of women. More shocking is the sight of women politicians' crossing swords with one another along narrow party lines, where their common interest as women is involved. Gail Omvedt has very aptly pointed out that party politics "does not organize the force of women but simply taps it, to feed its own machine and in the process sucks it out and leaves it stagnating". 

Before we conclude this chapter, some observations on the role of different women's organizations in West Bengal, are in order. There has been a sizeable increase in the number of women's organizations and their membership in recent times, thanks to the initiative taken by educated women of West Bengal. First, there are organizations, with a non-political image, specifically built around the object of improving the status of women. They organize seminars, symposia, morchas and processions, provide legal aid to women and seek to influence public opinion through such activities. Sachetana, Women's Co-ordinating Council, Women's Research Centre and Professional Training Institute

for Women belong to this category. City-based, and led by educated women, these organizations are doing much commendable work in West Bengal by campaigning against dowry and ostentatious marriage, holding community marriages without dowry and offering free legal aid and professional training for needy women.\textsuperscript{51}

The second type of women's organizations are affiliated to different political parties in West Bengal, e.g., the Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti of CPI-M, the Paschim Banga Mahila Samiti, of CPI, the Nikhil Banga Mahila Sangha, of RSP, the Mahila Sanskritik Sangha, affiliated to SUCI, the Pradesh Congress Mahila Samiti, of Congress, and the Paschim Banga Agragami Mahila Samiti, affiliated to Forward Bloc. These organizations champion the cause of women from a definite political-ideological perspective. Leadership of such organizations comes from educated women who hold important positions in the political parties, they represent. They raise various demands for women's welfare, organize women's movements for securing those and seek to promote women's political consciousness through such activities.

In the politically charged atmosphere of West Bengal, educated women have voiced their stand from time to time in support of, or in opposition to, various political parties, on questions of civil liberties and democratic rights, price-rise, police atrocities, abolition of antiquated social customs like dowry, etc. Women's organizations, affiliated to different political parties have played a key role in articulating and mobilizing women. But, the first type of organizations also indirectly shapes the minds of their followers vis-a-vis the existing political system. Thus, women's organizations spread political consciousness among women overtly or covertly. First, educated women are drawn to these. Then, they mobilize the great majority of illiterate, unconscious women.

Here, we can make a case for a positive correlation between education and politicization of women. But women's organizations have failed to reach many corners of West Bengal. Even educated women are often found to be unaware of their existence. Besides, women leaders of such organizations have not always been able to take prompt actions in solving many of the day-to-day problems of women's lives. The strength and weaknesses of women's efforts to organize themselves, for fighting politically against injustice and oppression, have

been summed up by Omvedt in the following words:

"There is a significant spread of consciousness about the oppression of women. There is a fair amount of activity continuing in the form of marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, new magazines, conferences, programmes. Middle class women, students and young employees, come together on a spontaneous basis to fight various forms of oppression, but their organizations remain in flux, hampered by individualism, lack of solidarity and the absence of a common perspective." 53

It is regrettable that in West Bengal, which was among the first Indian provinces to experience the modernizing 'Renaissance' and which encouraged female participation in the Independence struggle 54, women have not been given weightage as a political force in proportion to their numerical strength and despite their performance in education. Consequently, their general status has also not changed much within the given political framework.

Taking women's political consciousness and political participation as indicators of their modernity, we find that women in West Bengal have to go a long way before they can become really modern. Education has been the pace-setter in this


direction. But mere spread of education, ill-directed and ill-planned, which does not enjoins upon its recipients to take an active part in political movements, claiming an equal share in political leadership and representation with men, and enforcing this realization of equality, specially on the menfolk of our society, cannot carry the message of modernity too far.

In order to make our women modern through politicizing them, first of all, along with education, a healthy political atmosphere has to be built-up, free from intrigues, violence, corruption and nepotism.

Secondly, women should be restored to their position as the subject of politics rather than the object they have been made out to be. For this purpose, a revolutionary change is needed in the norms and attitudes of individuals and organizations. Particularly, political parties have a special responsibility in this respect.

Thirdly, it is necessary to combine political, economic and social issues together, for inspiring women to take part in movements for socio-political change.

Finally, some drastic changes in the socio-economic structure may guarantee women, an equal place in political
authority and power structures. If the structure of the society is changed, the ideological superstructure will change, liberalizing the attitudes of both men and women towards women's participation in politics.