It is not by chance that ‘politics’ and ‘city’ have the same Greek root – Polis. Politics is the organised effort to obtain and exercise power – the power to manage what is ‘public’ and to govern society.\(^1\) Politics presupposes social interactions and interdependence, which in turn require a government to coordinate a whole range of services and infrastructure available to everyone. This is true of local politics also. Politics in cities is significant, as interdependence is a typically urban phenomenon. It is in cities that the social division of labour makes the well being of the individual dependent upon the work of others. Urban/City politics concerns itself with the political behaviour of the city people, which unites them into a community. This unity is further forged by the legal-institutional structure of local government in a city or town. City people and the city government emerge as principal actors involved in political interactions in the arena of urban politics. The present study has made a modest attempt to comprehend this process of interaction in a city in one of the Third World developing countries. In recent times, as urbanisation is ever expanding, as growth is overtaking urban infrastructure and as pressure for decentralisation is building up, most developing countries are trying hard to rearrange the formal institutions of urban governance and redefine urban political processes. In India also, the far-reaching Constitutional Amendment legislated in the early 90s represents an example of such comprehensive efforts. Urban governance and politics in the country demand increasing attention than before in this changing perspective.

It is more and more being realised that local government in the developing countries is an eminently suitable machinery to increase people’s participation in

policy-formulation and implementation. Successful implementation of development policies, it is felt, can never be ensured by-passing local government and popular involvement. The study of the political process in the city of Medinipur was taken up to examine the extent and nature of such popular participation in the policy-making process, its impact on the policy decisions of the local government and the role performed by the city managers in a particular urban area in a developing country like India. The research has indicated to some important characteristics of the urban political process in the city. We have discussed that in course of our analysis of the different aspects of city politics in Medinipur in the previous chapters. Here, let us summarise the major findings of the present research.

**Major Findings of the Study**

First, it has been found that the city people as well as the city policy-makers in Medinipur have a restricted perception of the function and role of the local government. It is interesting to note that the major issues in city politics have mostly centred on the day-to-day basic needs of civic services and amenities. Issues of larger dimensions such as health care, education, other welfare measures and overall socio-economic development of the locality do not appear as the crux of the urban political process. The ‘Economic Development Model’ or the ‘Welfare-State Model’ of local politics as found in the West seem not to be applicable in case of Medinipur. The city people in Medinipur are primarily bothered with the fulfilment of their routine civic needs and demands by the municipal authority. They seldom perceive their city government as an agency performing a much greater and significant role in the overall development of the locality and thus contributing also to the process of national development. Such an attitude has developed perhaps due to the limited functional jurisdiction of the local government, paucity of resources and a lack of well-knit personnel system. People can hardly expect the city government to perform any other significant role than carrying out day-to-day routine works. The local government has generally been deprived of developmental functional responsibilities and as such, stands far
away from playing the role of the local state. It simply does not possess meaningful powers and functions to perform that role. As regards the perception of the city managers of the major issues in Medinipur’s urban politics and of the role of the local government, a close resemblance with the people’s perception of the matters can be noticed. Like the city people, the city policy-makers are also mainly concerned with the delivery of basic civic services and amenities. A majority of the elected councillors in Medinipur are found to be primarily ‘ward-focussed city fathers’ concerned only with the well being of their own wards and constituencies and providing them with minimum civic needs. Only the rest are ‘city-centered’ in their attitude and performance, who think of the development of the city as whole. Further, very few of the policy-makers in the city have been generalists who address such broader issues as overall urban development, extent of government control, protection of the urban environment and so on. What operates in the town of Medinipur, then, is a kind of ‘low politics’ involving only the routine matters of people’s daily lives and works. As a result, the political process as such in the town appears to be dull and non-vibrant.

Secondly, as regards people’s participation in the urban political process, citizens in Medinipur are found to be only moderately participative. A little more than fifty percent of the city people are active participants while the rest participate either occasionally or not at all. Moreover, a large amount of participatory input is centred on the act of voting only. The average voter turnouts in the municipal polls in Medinipur during 1980-1993 were in the range of seventy to seventy-five percent. This reasonably high rate of voting apparently indicates towards a participative citizenry in the town. However, when the active voter-respondents were asked whether they were equally participative in the process of the city politics between elections, more than a majority of them (around 51 percent) answered in the negative. This points to an interesting aspect

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2 The term has been borrowed from, C. Cockburn, Local State (London: Pluto Press, 1987).
3 This concept was used by J. Bulpitt in his work, Terror and Power in the United Kingdom (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).
of the nature of people's participation in Medinipur. The urban political process usually does not generate much interest and enthusiasm among the common people. It is only during municipal elections that the city people shake off their inertia and get involved in political acts. In between the election periods they are seldom bothered with the ongoing political process in their city. Very few resort to acts other than voting and get themselves involved in the process of urban policy-making during non-election times. The overall apathy of the city people towards the urban political process is perhaps due to the fact that the city government on its part has not been very efficient in its performance and responsive to public demands. It has over the years generally failed to solve the urban problems. This ineffectiveness of the city government has made people to think that participation in the process of urban governance would be of little value – it could hardly change the manner of functioning of the local government. Thus they maintain a 'subject' attitude towards the political process and make little participatory input in the city politics of Medinipur. They develop a sort of a skeptic view that commoners have nothing to contribute in the process of making and implementation of policies. This apathy towards and lack of participation in the policy-making process on the part of the people have in turn made the city managers nonchalant. They do not take a serious note of the civic problems, bother little to perform their duties and responsibilities sincerely and to remain accountable to the citizens. Thus, a vicious circle operates as a result of which the process of urban governance in the city suffers.

Thirdly, from the present research it has been found that the degree of participation by the people in Medinipur city politics vary primarily according to differences in their age and level of education. Those belonging to the middle-age group are found to be most participative while the younger and the older people participate to lesser extents. A curvilinear relationship exists between the two variables – age and degree of political participation. As regards the relationship between participation and level of education, we find that in the town of Medinipur, people who have received more formal-institutional education
participate in the city political process to a greater extent than those who are less educated.

Fourthly, people's participation in Medinipur city politics is characterised by the conspicuous absence of forms of neighbourhood associations for collective and cooperative action by the citizens. Citizens' groups and associations are lacking in most parts of the town. Only in 7 out of the total 24 municipal wards we could find much associations – popularly known as 'Nagarik Samitis' (Citizens' Committees). Such associations are formed to look after the community problems faced by the people in a locality and to try to solve them with the help of collective and cooperative actions of the citizens. Problems and issues are to be discussed through face-to-face interactions in the committee meetings which are supposed to be held at regular intervals. In practice, however, such associations have not been generally very effective in dealing with the problems of the city dwellers and transmitting citizens' grievances to appropriate authorities. Those are loosely organised, meetings are infrequent and often too informal and the degree of people's involvement in those not very encouraging. Many remain unaware of an opportunity to participate and sceptical of their ability to influence the policy decisions. In short, the very culture of collective action through neighbourhood associations or alike – quite common in the West – has not developed in our case.

We put a premium to this particular aspect of participation because the importance of collective efforts of the individuals in the local political process cannot be neglected. Neighbourhood-based government draws easily on people's sense of identity with the area they live in. People know they are going to have frequent interactions with their neighbours. Neighbourhood associations are well suited to face-to-face interaction that can nurture cooperative behaviour. The lack of such institutional arrangement in Medinipur limits the scope of people's participation in the city political process. Most of the city people participate in individual capacity and few resort to collective action. As a result, the sense of community does not develop.

Fifthly, people's participation in the process of urban policy-making in Medinipur has not always necessarily led to 'responsive' policy outputs on the
part of the city government. Policy-decisions of the local government and their consequences have not been compatible with the needs of the local community. The elected and politically responsible local body in the town has not been able to transform people’s needs into political actions. True, a number of constraints stand in the way of effective functioning of the city government. Paucity of funds, lack of technical staff, excessive state control, lack of civic awareness amongst the citizens are all, no doubt, serious obstacles in the way of efficient urban management in the town. But over and above, the indifference and negligence of the city fathers towards the civic problems and issues of urban development stand as major factors behind the sorry state of urban governance. It has been revealed from the present study that though the policy-makers have been ‘responsive’ in terms of knowing what the citizens want and agreeing with their priorities, that has not necessarily led to a successful solution of those problems by the former. The elected city councillors through their policy-decisions have been able to do very little to solve the major civic issues and problems. As the degree of ‘success’ of the policies of the municipal authority on major problems has been minimum, the score of ‘responsiveness’ of the leaders/councillors on this count is too meagre. The indifference and lackadaisical approach of the city fathers are responsible for this. The existing constraints notwithstanding, the city government has failed to perform even the minimum, which could have been done within the limited jurisdiction and resource base. The elected councillors are found to be active mostly during municipal elections. The task of electioneering and wooing the electorate with lofty promises bring them closer to their wards and constituencies which during other times can seldom have the opportunity to meet their representatives. Unfortunately, very little of these promises are actually transformed into policy-decisions. And the plight of the city people continues. What is of particular concern in Medinipur is the in-built incapacity of the municipal authority. It has been lethargic to mobilise its own resources, unable to spend its funds to the fullest capacity, lacking in initiative to solve civic problems and failing to streamline the overloaded staff pattern. In addition, there has been a serious lack of work culture in the municipality. All these have led to inefficient urban management in the city of Medinipur. And for this it is not the city people
who are to be blamed. It is true that all the people do not take serious interest in matters of city politics. But even those who participate get very little in return. The moderately high rate of popular participation has failed to engender a proportionate amount of response on the part of the city government. The arguments of the proponents of participatory democracy that participation nourishes the democratic spirit of individuals and transforms institutions so that they become more effective instruments of democracy, do not absolutely hold good in case of Medinipur. The impact of participation has not made the institution of local government more responsive to the preferences of citizens. As we have seen, other factors intervene to influence the actual functioning of the city government and the role-performance of the policy-makers. Participation alone does not ensure efficient urban management.

Finally, while examining the nature of urban politics in Medinipur we find that it is not completely autonomous. We enquired about this aspect of city politics as we considered autonomy to be essential in maintaining the democratic nature of the local bodies and enabling them to act for themselves unfettered by constraints. A critical test of democracy is local autonomy. High levels of local autonomy might enhance local responsiveness and accountability. However, in the modern world, no local government enjoys absolute autonomy. Most of the urban local governments operate within an environment, which is more or less constrained, more or less decentralised. The question of autonomy of urban politics in a particular town or city is to be understood in the context of its relation with higher level government and political process. Whether local government is free from interference from the above or is penetrated and controlled by the higher level is the major issue. Part of this control and domination may be formal and the rest informal. City politics in Medinipur is found to be open and penetrated from above – both formally and informally. Formal domination is bureaucratic and governmental. Informal domination is embedded in the political process. So far as the formal-legal controls of urban local bodies by higher level government is concerned: Medinipur Municipality has often remained under the control and supervision of the state government which reached its extreme in the act of supersession and suspended animation of the elected body. The process of
informal domination in the town is maintained through vertical-political linkages' between the state and locality on such aspects as leadership, local elections, party factionalism and policy-making. Thus, city politics in Medinipur lacks autonomy and this definitely affects the quality of urban management.

The present study, then, reveals some salient features of the urban political process in the city of Medinipur. Policy-making in the city is narrow in its scope, involving only the routine demands of basic civic needs and amenities, both the city people and city managers share a restricted image of the roles and responsibilities of the city government; the political culture in the city is not too participatory in nature; policy-makers are constrained and lack involvement in the process of urban government; their negligence and incapability in addressing the civic problems affect the making and implementation of public policies. The city of Medinipur stands as a dependent political sub-system. Decision making crucial to the city is often centralised at the higher levels. Moreover the process of Decision making conforms more to the incremental than the rational model of policy making.

Limitations of the Study

Whether the above features of urban political process is unique to Medinipur or can be found in other similar types of cities and towns in India is difficult to conclude on the basis of a single case study like the present. The present research is limited in scope in this respect. Comparative studies of the political processes in a number of towns over a period of time can only lead to some generalisations. However, we feel that a case study like the present one is still of some significance as it can help to indicate the patterns and trends of city politics in a particular urban environment. On the basis of a number of such specific case studies, a comprehensive idea about the urban political process in India in general can be developed. The present research within its limited scope has not been able to deal with all the relevant aspects of the urban political process. It is felt, for example, that the role of voluntary associations in city politics should be examined in more detail. Another untouched field has been the study of urban
social movements. Those can be examined in the Indian context in relation to specific actions by various classes, groups and communities living in cities, by migrants and long term urban residents. It may be significant also to inquire whether the urban dweller has a greater sense of political efficacy than his rural counterpart, whether he is more mobile, more open to innovations and collective actions. Such studies at the individual level can help mobilisation-participation studies at the collective level. Lastly, the nature, functioning and dimensions of city governments and local politics may vary between single-city dominant small states like West Bengal and large states like Punjab which are dominated by a number of important cities. While describing the urban scenario in West Bengal in course of the present study, we have seen how the primacy of Calcutta characterises the urban environment of the state. The primate city plays a dominating role over other cities and towns in the spheres of urban governance and overall urban development. In a state like Punjab the situation may not be the same. The pattern of urbanisation in India shows such wide inter-state variations. Thus, comparative studies of urban politics across states within India may be quite rewarding.

Why Study Urban Politics

Understanding the process of city politics has become imperative in the context of the urban revolution in recent times. The world is in the midst of a massive urban transformation unlike that of any other time in history. Presently, the last phase of this transformation is unfolding in the less developed/developing countries of Asia, Oceania, Africa and Latin America and Caribbean – commonly known as the ‘Third World’. As cities in developing countries continue to grow, increasing concentration of people in cities and towns lead to growing demands for basic civic amenities. At the same time, local governments in these countries are weakening in face of such apparently insurmountable demands for urban services. In the countries of the Third World, local governments continue to suffer from archaic management structure, limited powers, lack of functional competence and vulnerable constitutional position. In many of these countries local democracy is
imperfect in so far as the higher level government enjoys and, in practice, frequently exercises its power of superseding or suspending elected local bodies. Even when such bodies are not superseded/suspended, normally they are to function under the control of the superior government. Thus, they cannot discharge their democratic functions and are prevented from reflecting local preferences in decision-making. The case of India has been no different. Since independence the urban local bodies substantially declined over the years due to their undefined role, leading to systemic erosion in the municipal functional domain, inadequate resource base and pervasive state control. The absence of a national urban policy even after independence and the indifferent attitude and prolonged neglect by state governments made the urban local bodies static organisations which had not been in a position to deal with the growing demands for civic services and amenities. Only very recently (in 1992), with the enactment of the Constitution (74th Amendment) Act, a comprehensive attempt has been made for devising a democratic and empowered system of municipal government in India. It is too early to judge how far it has been able to refurbish and rejuvenate the urban local government institutions.

A city or a town can be best governed by a government of its own. As population growth will be virtually synonymous with urban growth in the coming decade, the focus of efforts to develop sustainable human settlements must be on cities. This then is the urban challenge. Policy makers should be more receptive to the need for new institutional responses to this challenge and to urban management initiative at the local level. The local government through its policy decisions has to respond to the needs and demands of the city people. Thus, understanding the process of making and implementation of policies for the urban dwellers in short, the nature of urban politics - becomes more and more significant in the context of the changing urban scenario, particularly in the developing countries. Local government worth its name should possess local initiative for development in order to satisfy local needs and aspirations. The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul in June 1996 has categorically stated that,
the crisis of governance in most countries can only be resolved through wider local participation at the urban and community level. The process of political decentralisation, already advanced in some countries, must continue and transform the current weak governance of cities into more accountable and transparent processes of administration and participation.4

Further, the World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities (WACLA), in the Habitat II Final Declaration, has noted that the future of our towns and cities must be conceived and organised around the concept of sustainable human development and that, sustainable human development must be conceived and enacted at the local level. Decentralisation should be the favoured approach in the good governance of human settlements. Efficient urban management and making cities sustainable are thus the crucial tasks faced by urban planners and policymakers around the world. This demand increasing attention from the political scientists to inquire in-depth into the process of urban policy making. How to establish a suitable institutional framework for the exercise of local democracy, how to grant autonomy to local authorities, how to increase popular participation in the process of urban policy making and how to make the city government effective and more responsive to public demands— are the major questions which need to be addressed. Urban political studies at different levels can seek answers to the above questions and contribute to a large extent to successful urban governance. The present research has been a modest attempt to understand the urban political process in a particular city in India in the context of the ever-growing importance of urban management throughout the world and particularly in the developing countries. It would be rewarding if it can generate further interest in urban politics and lead to more comprehensive future researches in that field.