Introduction

The urban revolution in the present era makes understanding the different aspects of city life imperative. The 'politics' within a city constitutes one of the most important of such aspects. Urban politics is a vast and complex arena. One of the major features of urban politics is that it is the politics of want, of basic services, of minimum security of life and property. The processes by which these needs are perceived, combined, advocated and fulfilled, constitute the crux of urban politics. The city can be viewed as a distributional mechanism. This is true of the city as a whole and of the government within it. The city allocates many of its values through the policy choices of its government. The demands and interests of the city people need to be fulfilled, as effectively as possible, for the promotion of good life. The three attributes of local government — pluralism, participation and responsiveness — provide a strong case for its continued existence as the principal means of local service delivery. It has been generally argued that local authorities provide or promote a wide range of public services that are best administered locally under democratic control. They are able to do so in a way that is responsive to local needs. If local service delivery is considered as one of the primary rationale for local government, it is important to note that the value of

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efficiency in the delivery of local services has a broader meaning than the narrow businessman's definition. It encompasses the concept of 'responsiveness' to the needs of local citizens. More so in a representative democracy where those in seats of political authority are entrusted with the responsibility to rule 'for the people'. Local government, however, is not to be seen merely as a provider of services. If that were all, it would be right to consider whether some of the services could be more efficiently provided by other means. The importance of local government lies in the fact that it is the means by which people can provide services for themselves, can take an active and constructive part in the business of government and can decide for themselves what kind of services they want. In short, local government provides opportunities for people to govern themselves. It has been generally acclaimed that,

local government represents a sense of local community, diffusion of power in society, democracy and self-government, localness of knowledge, diversity of response to policy problems and economy of resource utilisation.\(^2\)

In a political system where the idea of democratic decentralisation has been put into practice, the local government institution emerges as the government next door to the people. The local authority has the potential by reason of its localness to be easily accessible and exposed to influences by its citizens. It operates on a scale that can be seen and comprehended. An elected local government in an urban area — a Corporation or a Municipality as in case of India — is expected to look after and manage the local issues and problems with the involvement of the urban dwellers. City people depend upon the urban government for basic civic amenities and services. The city government, in response to public needs, is to allocate resources among the urban residents through its policies and actions. Thus, the citizen on the one hand and the municipal authority on the other are involved in a process of continuous interaction. To comprehend the nature of the

process of urban governance and politics in a city or town we then, first, have to identify the various demands and needs of the people – the major issues of urban politics in a particular urban area. One of the basic guiding principles of local government is 'participation', through which it contributes to local democracy by offering citizens opportunities to be involved in deciding about the delivery of services. The people in a city or town have to take an active part to get their demands fulfilled by the city government. Those should be duly transmitted to the authority with an attempt on the part of the citizens to get favourable policy decisions. It has been a widely accepted argument that 'participation' – the bedrock of democracy – can be best promoted at the grassroots level. The local government institutions successfully incorporate the participation of average citizens into public policy-making. Proponents of participatory democracy argue that participation nourishes the democratic spirit of individuals and transforms institutions so that they become more effective instruments of democracy. The most important impact of participation on the institutions of government is to make them more responsive to the preferences of citizens. It seems then that to understand the process of urban policy-making in a town or city, it is not enough to identify the major demands and interests of the urban dwellers. One should also take into account how these are placed before the policy-makers and what step people take to influence the policy-making – in short, how they 'participate' in the process. In our bid to comprehend the nature of urban politics in Medinipur town, we have, therefore, sought to find out the civic needs of the town people that constitute the major issues of urban governance and to look into the manner the citizens act to resolve them. This chapter particularly deals with these two aspects of municipal politics in Medinipur.

The Issues in City Politics

The town of Medinipur became municipalised as early as in 1865. Medinipur Municipality is one of the oldest of the 11 municipalities in the district. Due to

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deliberate negligence of the colonial masters no serious developmental plans and programmes for the town was implemented and the normal urban expansion and growth was disturbed. Since independence, the town has developed mainly as an administrative-cum-commercial centre in the district. A steady increase of urban population occurred in the town over the years. According to 1991 Census, the town had a population of 1,25,000 persons, which has further increased to amount to more than one and half lakhs till date. During the last decade and half in particular, the spate in population increase in the town has led to an increasing demand for basic civic services and amenities. Growing urbanisation has cast its spell on the lives of the town dwellers. Local needs are becoming pressing day by day which warrant effective solution by the local government in charge of urban management. In order to identify these needs and demands – the major issues in the town politics – the present study attempts to find out how the people in Medinipur perceive the major problems faced by them as integral parts of their urban existence. To get an idea about the people’s perception of such problems, we resorted to interviewing a sampled population of the town. One hundred and five (105) respondents were selected from among the city people by using random/quota sampling. The municipal ward was taken as the unit. From each of the 21 municipal wards in Medinipur, 5 individuals were chosen (a total of 105), each from 5 randomly selected households. The interview of the sampled population was structured and conducted with the help of questionnaire. It is obvious that the sample was not sizeable enough to be truly representative and attempts at generalisations on its basis would always remain tentative. Nevertheless, the data gathered in this context are helpful, at least in revealing some patterns of people’s perception of major issues in the city politics of Medinipur. Let us now take a glimpse of that in the following.

In order to get an idea of people’s perception of the major problems faced by them, our respondents were asked whether they consider the issues like drinking water supply, housing, transport, street conditions and street lighting, sewage and sanitation, and recreational and cultural facilities as problem areas in their town. All of them replied in the affirmative though their perception of the graveness of the above problems varied. All the 105 respondents stated that lack
of adequate supply of drinking water for the town people has been the most serious problem of everyday civic life in Medinipur. About 90% of them (95 persons) perceived sewage and sanitation as a major problem. Road conditions and street lighting, transport facilities within the town, and recreational and cultural facilities were considered as inadequate and unsatisfactory, in order of preference, by 70% (74 persons), 30% (32 persons) and 10% (11 persons) of the sample population. Housing problem was a concern also to 10% (11 persons) of the population. In course of interviewing the people, they were further asked whether they would identify any other issue as problematic besides those mentioned above (and enlisted in the questionnaire). 42 out of 105 respondents (40%) in reply expressed their concern about gradual encroachment of town roads by hawkers, shopkeepers and unauthorised structures, while 10% of them (11 persons) perceived drug addiction and anti-social activities among the city youths as a growing menace. Variations in city people’s perception of the problems of civic life in Medinipur, as revealed from the data stated above, can be presented diagrammatically as in Figure 5.1.

![Figure 5.1 People's perception of the civic problems](image)

The issues discussed above are common to Medinipur town as a whole. However, residents in certain areas of the town face some additional problems...
such as 'bustee' (slum) development and garbage disposal, which are unique to those localities. Such problems are more acute in municipal ward nos. 2, 8 and 10 covering the areas of Kuikota, Sepai Bazar, Battala Chawk and Miabazar. These lie within the core area of old Medinipur town. Being more densely populated than other parts of the town and grown in a haphazard and unplanned way, these areas pose a greater problem to the city authority in terms of providing basic civic amenities to the residents. The problems identified by the people — whether applicable generally to the town or area specific — are mostly centred on their day-to-day basic needs of civic services and amenities. It is interesting to note that these constitute the major issues in urban governance in the town of Medinipur. Issues of larger dimensions such as health care, 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' of urban local government as represented by the works of Jones and Batchelor,\(^4\) Ellain,\(^5\) Stone\(^6\) and others, or 'The Welfare-State Model' as found in Germany, the Netherlands, Britain and the Scandinavian countries, thus seem not to be applicable to our particular case study. People in Medinipur town are primarily bothered with the fulfilment of their day-to-day civic needs and demands by the municipal authority. As has been expressed by our respondents during the course of interview, 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. Borrowing Bulpitt's term, we can state that what operates then in the town of Medinipur is a kind of 'low politics'\(^7\) involving people's daily lives and works. A plausible explanation


of such a perception of the local government may be that due to its limited functional jurisdiction, paucity of resources and lack of a well-knit personnel system, the people can hardly expect it to perform any greater role than of performing day-to-day routine works. A recent study on municipal management in four West Bengal municipalities has raised the point that researches should be made to find out the nature and degree of seriousness with which the people look at their municipal government. Such researches can help us to conclude whether the way people in Medinipur perceive the role of their city government is something unique or is the general pattern to be found in other cities and towns also. As for the present, we are not in a position to make any such generalisation on the basis of our single particular case study. As in Medinipur the issues concerning basic civic services and amenities constitute the core area of urban policy-making by the city authority, those cannot be neglected as insignificant. We would rather like to examine some of those in further detail.

When our respondents identified a number of issues as problem areas in their day-to-day civic life, they were asked to comment on how those have been dealt with by their city government during the last 10-15 years. Only 20 out of 105 respondents (19.1%) opined that the problems have been ‘effectively controlled’ by the municipal authority. 35 people (33.3%) felt that the state of affairs have ‘remained the same’ during the past years, while 47.6% of the total respondents (50 out of 105) stated that the problems have ‘Increased in intensity’ over the last one and half decade. The people has generally attributed the lack of improvement and the worsening of the civic amenities in the town to ineffective resource mobilisation by the municipal authority, corruption, party-political factionalism and indifference of the city managers to local needs. This is related essentially with the nature of response of the local government to the demands and interests of the city people and constitutes a major aspect of urban governance in the city of Medinipur. We will deal with it in the subsequent chapter. Before that, let us now have a look at some of the major problems faced by the town dwellers.

The Major Issues and Problems

In terms of the graveness attached to the various civic problems by our respondents (as referred to in Figure 1), we can classify those into major and minor issues. Accordingly, we consider the problems of drinking water supply, sewage and sanitation, and street condition and lighting as major issues and the rest as minor and like to deal with the major ones in some detail.

The Problem of Drinking Water Supply

Lack of adequate supply of drinking water to the people has been a perennial problem in the town of Medinipur. Due to its typical geological feature, the town has no underground reserve of water. The bed of river Kangesabati (Kasai), which flows adjacent to the town, is the only water source. The sub-soil source of water from Kasai is tapped by using deep tube-wells and then supplied to the town. The crisis persists throughout the year and reaches its extreme during the summer. A steady increase of the population in Medinipur town has accelerated the amount of the daily requirement of drinking water. And the supply has always lagged behind. During 1980-81, the daily requirement was 24 lac gallons, against which the municipal authority was able to supply only 7 lac gallons.9 The Medinipur municipal water-supply system was initiated in 1924 on Kasai riverbank at Rangamati area. Since then, interim measures were taken from time to time for the improvement of water supply in tune with the gradual growth of localities. No major long-term plan was chalked out for a permanent solution of the problem. The work-capacity of the deep-tubewells, installed long ago, had gradually declined and was no longer adequate to meet the growing demands of a much larger number of city population. Lack of proper maintenance of the machinaries and shortsighted and non-futuristic attitude of the city planners over the years has led to such a situation. What added to the plight of the city people was the absence of an elected municipal government in Medinipur since the late 60s for more than a decade. This was in fact true also of West Bengal in general during the period.

Most of the urban local self-governing institutions remained superseded by the state government and regular periodic elections to those bodies were long overdue. In the absence of an elected and empowered representative civic authority, the quality of urban governance naturally suffered in the town of Medinipur. Fresh election to Medinipur Municipality was held during 1980-81 and a new elected civic body was constituted for the town after a gap of about twelve years.

The constitution of the new body did not however mean the end of the miseries of the city people. The problem of adequate supply of drinking water has continued over the years and remains a major one in Medinipur till date. The problem became so grave during 1981-82, that the residents of some municipal wards filed mass petition to the city authority and the issue was even raised in Parliament by the then Member of Parliament (M.P.) from Medinipur district, Sri Narayan Chaube.\(^{10}\) The municipal authority, in face of the public grievance, shifted its responsibility by complaining about and making responsible the Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department of the state government in this matter. Recurrent power failures and lack of proper maintenance of the pump sets in different pumping stations in the town have chronically cut short their fullest utilisation. To make things worse, a considerable amount of water is wasted daily due to defective water taps in the streets. The main pipe lines for water supply are very old and often break down. There is no arrangement for standby pump sets. Moreover, the personnel in charge of water supply works are mainly unskilled labours. At present, the daily requirement of drinking water in the town is 35 lakh gallons against which the municipality can supply only 18 lakh gallons. Thus scarcity of pure piped water has been a daily affair for the town dwellers. Out of the total 20,543 holdings in the town only 4736 have been provided with water.

\(^{10}\) *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (a Bengalee daily), (Calcutta: 14.8.81), p.6
For a permanent solution of the problem of drinking water in Medinipur, a master-plan for water supply was approved by the state government in 1993-94. It proposed the construction of an underground reservoir near Kasai riverbed and a few others at different parts of the town, erection of two more overhead tanks in addition to the four at present and an elaborate network of pipelines. The plan projected a supply of 60 lac gallons of water per day. The estimated cost for the project was around ten and half crores. The financial burden was to be borne by the West Bengal Government, Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) and Medinipur Municipality. Till date, the municipal authority has received about 70% of the total fund. The state government and HUDCO have disbursed around 7 crores of rupees. Most of this amount has been spent already, but very little work done. Only one overhead reservoir has been constructed and few pipe lines laid. The present Vice-Chairman of Medinipur Municipality admits lack of planning in this respect.12 The crisis of drinking water continues.

**Sewage and Sanitation**

The steady expansion of the town over the last few years has gradually engulfed the paddy fields at the outskirts. Houses are being built by filling up the agricultural lands. This has resulted in a blockade to the natural water outlet of the town. The town faces severe water-logging during the rainy season. The existing drainage system within the town is quite inadequate. Most of the drains are still open and ‘kuchha’ (made of mud). The length of existing surface ‘kuchha’ and ‘pucca’ (metalled) drains are 263 kms. and 79 kms. respectively. These are seldom regularly cleaned, often not even once in a month. The municipal authority has not been able over the years to convert the extensive network of ‘kuccha’ drains into metalled ones. Medinipur town has no underground sewerage system. This feature is perhaps common to most of the municipal towns in West Bengal. The ‘Dwariband Canal’ – the main sewerage system within Medinipur town - has been choked due to lack of regular cleaning and proper maintenance. It needs

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12 Interview with the Vice-Chairman, Medinipur Municipality.
immediate renovation. The Municipality drew up a plan in the mid-90s for digging an alternative canal, which would run from north to south of the town. But it has not materialised yet.

Medinipur town has both service privies and sanitary latrines. The municipality has made some breakthrough in sanitation services by converting a large number of service privies into sanitary ones during the last 15 years. The arrangements for collection and removal of garbage and night soil. However, are still quite unsatisfactory. About 120 tons of garbage accumulates per day in the town, of which the municipality removes only about 72 tons. Garbage from different narrow lanes and by-lanes are collected by the sweepers of the municipality by wheelbarrow and then deposited in the dustbins on the main roads. Then it is carried out by trucks to be deposited at Lalbagh trenching ground. Often the garbage is dumped openly on the roadside where there is no dustbin. Due to insufficient number of trucks in the possession of the municipality garbage remains piled up even for a week before they are removed, thus creating a highly unhygienic condition – particularly in the more densely populated areas and market places. The shortage of permanent conservancy workers in the municipality is also responsible for unsatisfactory garbage disposal. The town still has the primitive and deplorable practice of employing scavengers for removing night soil.

Road Condition and Street Lighting

The State Highway No. 5 passes by the eastern side of Medinipur town in a north to south direction and connects Kharagpur in the south at a distance of about 13 kms. across river Kasai over a bridge. The town is connected with other places on all sides by a well-maintained network of roads. The total road length within the town is 228 km. which comprises of pitch road, morrum road, concrete road and brick pavement road. Out of the total road length, 139 kms. of road are
black-top and motorable and the rest 89 kms. are non-motorable. Some of the important local roads within the town are Kutchari Road, Mia Bazar Street, Vidyasagar Road, Municipal Office Road, Hospital Road and Sukumar Sengupta Sarani. There are four main transport corridors in the town, which have, in course of time, become too congested for smooth flow of vehicular traffic. As the town of Medinipur is a fast growing trading and commercial centre, number of shops and hutment have come up on both sides of the main roads. Most of these have often been unauthorised constructions encroaching upon the roads and resulting in traffic congestion. There is no secondary road system for vehicular traffic in the town. The number of traffic is steadily increasing and the existing roads are becoming incapable to manage the load. During peak hours, traffic moves in snails pace and traffic jams are a routine affair. Most of the roads within the town lie in a miserable state with numbers of potholes every here and there. Lack of proper maintenance and increasing pressure of transport has deteriorated the conditions of the road. The lighting arrangement in the streets of the town is also inadequate. The Annual Reports of Medinipur Municipality highlight this as a chronic problem. There is no street light in the slum areas and lighting facilities are still quite insufficient in the two new wards (Ward Nos. 20 & 21) of the town. Lack of vigilance leads to random theft of street bulbs and electric wires making things worse.

**Policy-makers' Perception of the Issues**

As noted earlier, besides the three problems discussed above, the town people in Medinipur are also plagued with the inadequacy of other civic services and amenities. All of these are closely related with their day-to-day living. We, in the present study, have attempted an inquiry into the ways the people in Medinipur involve themselves in deciding about the delivery of the civic services. What part they take to get their demands fulfilled, how they act to resolve their problems. Medinipur Municipality – the government for the town people – is to allocate

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resources among the urban residents through its policies and actions. As policy-decisions of the city government are supposed to address the civic problems faced by the people, much depends on how the policy-makers themselves perceive the problem areas—the main issues in urban governance and policy-making. So, before looking into the manner the people in Medinipur ‘participate’ in the city political process, let us have a glance of the policy-makers’ perception of the major issues in the urban politics of Medinipur.

We interviewed 30 councillors (including those in the present and previous boards) to get an idea of their perception of the civic problems. Their responses are presented below in a tabular form:

Table 5.1 Councillors’ Perception of the Major Civic-Problems in Medinipur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water supply</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road conditions and maintenance</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street lighting</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewage and sanitation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disposal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Personal interview of the councillors.
Note: Individual councillors mentioned more than one problem. This is the reason for the inflated number/percentage.

It seems that the councillors’ perception of the major issues and problems in Medinipur generally conforms to that of the city people. The citizen-respondents and the leader-respondents in our study have more or less identified the same issues as of serious concern in the civic life of the town—those related with the rendering of basic civic services and amenities. If perceptions of the two main actors in the arena of city politics—the people and the policy-makers—match with each other, one may be hopeful that people’s demands would be effectively translated into policy-decisions. Whether and how far that happens in the town of Medinipur is one of the aspects of inquiry of the present study. But
Participation and Local Democracy

One of the major arguments for local government as a democratic institution is on the grounds of participation. The linkage between local government and democracy is based on the proposition that political participation is meaningful insofar as it deals with the familiar – a tenet of the Federalist Papers. Another aspect of this argument is that the incentives for participation are stronger locally than nationally in that the consequences are more visible and immediate on the local level.\textsuperscript{14} It is argued that the impact of popular participation in government affairs is the greatest at the local level. It is here that the public services are most meaningful to the citizen. Community involvement and collective efforts for solving neighbourhood problems are the first steps towards realisation of longer goals of democracy and development.\textsuperscript{15} A basic element in the relationship between citizenship and urban politics concerns participation. Put simply the argument is that, participation is most likely to take place at the local level where people live and work and socialise, raise their families and draw upon the services and benefits of the state. If participation is seen as an essential feature of democracy, then urban politics can be regarded as central to the realisation and expression of citizenship. The most passionate arguments for participation, however, see it as teaching more than the responsibilities of citizenship. John Stuart Mill emphasised "the moral part of the instruction afforded by the participation of the private citizen".\textsuperscript{16} Rousseau in The Social Contract

\textsuperscript{14} Henry Teune, 'Local Government and Democratic Political Development', The Annals (of the American Academy of Political & Social Sciences) 540 (July 1995), p.18.
\textsuperscript{16} John Stuart Mill, Considerations on Representative government (London: Harper and Brothers, 1862), p.79.
emphasised the link between public service and the vitality of the state harping on the idea that participation builds community. Alexis De Tocqueville argued that town meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science: they bring it within people's reach, they teach men how to use and enjoy it.\textsuperscript{17} He believed that the 'spirit of liberty' is 'imbibed' through the practice of citizenship at the local level and argued that municipal institutions constitute the strength of free nations. Contemporary theorists like Oakeshott opines that civility denotes an order of moral (not instrumental) considerations.\textsuperscript{18} Jame Mansbridge maintains that in unitary democracies -- those that rely on consensus -- participation builds on bonds of friendship and this dynamic leads to true equality within the community.\textsuperscript{19} For Barber, participation in urban politics and community life is a potentially transformative experience. As he puts it, "citizens are certainly not born, but made as a consequence of civic education and political engagement in a free polity."\textsuperscript{20}

The local arena has generally been seen as a school for citizenship, the emphasis being on the skills of participation and debate. Participation at the local level may be motivated by practical concerns. As municipal government tends to have responsibility for every-day services, it is the appropriate target for much citizen activity. Participation refers to the right of citizens to be involved in the process of government -- to express views, to have them listened to, to be informed of decisions and the reasons behind them, to criticise and complain. This is the pluralist vision of a polyarchy -- a 'porous' political system which maximises points of access for people and groups to express their views to leaders.

\textsuperscript{17} Alexis de Tocqueville, \textit{Democracy in America} (London: Oxford University Press, 1946, first published 1835), p.57.
and to be involved in the process of governing. Verba and Nie in their seminal work on political participation in American cities, viewed participation as those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take. Their goal was to understand how the preferences of the citizens were communicated upward to those who make governmental decisions and to analyse its result. For them the relevant consequence of participation for the individual citizen is what he gets from the government. They looked beyond citizen participation in the electoral process – beyond voting and campaign activity – to various other ways citizens can be active. In fact, voting is but one highly episodic element of democratic life. Democracy involves wider participation in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public polices. Participation involves contacting politicians or government officials, joining pressure groups, attending meetings, signing petitions or demonstrating.

In short, the proponents of participatory democracy argue that politics can be made more meaningful only if more people participate. Structures of strong democracy should provide for meaningful involvement in politics where ordinary citizens make decisions about the allocation of goods and services in their neighbourhoods. And this can be best achieved at the local level. Indeed, local self-government and popular participation are seemingly so closely linked as to appear almost identical. The democratic ideal in local government implies that active participation of the citizens in local affairs is both a goal in itself and an instrument for strengthening democracy in society at large. Active participation in local affairs might be perceived, and has historically been perceived, as the most important training ground for democracy. With this ideal of local government in perspective, we in the present study, attempt to look into the manner the people in Medinipur town ‘participate’ in the local political process,

Citizens' Participation in Medinipur

Ideals and values may of course not always coincide with the reality. It thus becomes imperative to examine the theoretical assumptions with reference to concrete real life situations. Our study tries to find out whether the process of urban politics and governance in Medinipur conforms to the participatory ideal of local government. How far and in what manner people in Medinipur participate in the process of local policy-making? The town of Medinipur has a long history of municipalisation, which dates back to the second half of the 19th century. The district of Medinipur in general and the town in particular were the centre of much political activism both during the days of nationalist movement and the post-independence period. Medinipur has often been at the centre-stage of West Bengal politics since the 1950s. Such a background of participatory political culture in the town naturally led us to assume that the people in Medinipur would generally take an active part in matters of city politics. We started our inquiry with the hypothesis that the city people are quite participative in nature – they take an active part in raising their voices about their grievances and problems, transmitting those to the city government and trying to influence the process of policy-making. We further hypothesised that variations in age and level of education among the people affect their degree of participation. In our study we have attempted to test these research questions with data gathered by interviewing our respondents. As stated earlier in this chapter, a total of one hundred and five (105) residents of Medinipur town were interviewed with the help of a questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions.

Degree of Participation

When the respondents mentioned of the various civic problems they face (as discussed earlier), they were asked what they did about those problems. Did they feel it necessary to inform the city-government of the same or just remained passive subjects. For if delivery of services is seen as a primary responsibility of
the civic body and if it is to be responsive to public needs, the demands and interests of the city-people – the problems they face – must be transmitted to the policy-making authority. The city government must be made aware of the major issues on which it has to act and which it should try to resolve. A little more than 50% of the 105 respondents replied that they regularly try to draw the attention of the civic authority in their town to the day-to-day problems they face. A little less than 40% did the same occasionally and the remaining (around 10%) were not at all bothered to transmit their grievances to the authority. This data is presented below in a tabular form.

Table 5.2 Degree of Activeness of the People in Transmitting their Demands to the Authority (N=105).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of activeness</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>Per cent of the total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those who let the authority know of their problems regularly</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>52.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who transmit their demands occasionally</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who do not transmit at all</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>09.52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Personal interview of the citizens.

It is revealed from Table No. 5.2 that 95 out of 105 respondents convey their demands to the municipal authority – a majority of them regularly and the rest occasionally – while the remaining 10 are totally passive in that respect. Those who try to transmit their demands to the city government, feel it as their responsibility to do so. They value the voice of the individual. Unless people raise their voices about the civic problems they face and make the policy-makers aware about those, they cannot expect favourable policies aimed at solving those problems. Those who do not convey their demands to the municipal authority are of the view that commoners hardly matter in politics. They think that an ordinary citizen can seldom influence the authority and the process of policy-making by raising their voices. Moreover, they look at the city authority as inefficient,
corrupt and non-responsive to public demands and as such, consider it useless to transmit their interests and demands to the municipal body. Participation by people in the process of city governance is of little value to them – which perhaps justifies their ‘subject’ attitude towards the political process. They make no participatory input in the city politics of Medinipur.

Modes of Participation

When in a town or in a city the people attempt to place their needs and demands before the local government, they can either do it individually or collectively in an organised manner. The manner people will adopt for transmitting their grievances may depend upon their perception and experience of the relative effectiveness of the two ways, available institutional arrangements for collective action and the existing political culture in this respect in the concerned urban centre. We, in the present study, attempted an inquiry into this aspect of people’s participation in the city politics of Medinipur. When asked how they usually approach the city government with their demands and problems, 70 out of 105 respondents replied that they move alone in individual capacity while 25 of the respondents spoke of the collective method adopted by them. The remaining 10 do not transmit their demands to the authority at all.

Table 5.3 Manner in which City People Transmit their Demands to the Authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manner of approaching the authority</th>
<th>No. of people (out of 105)</th>
<th>Per cent of total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approaching personality in individual Capacity</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaching collectively</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not approaching at all</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>09.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Personal interview of the citizens.

23 Data gathered from citizens-interview in Medinipur town.
24 ibid.
The data presented in Table 5.3 show at the outset that around 67% of the respondents prefer to act individually, while collective action is resorted to by a mere 24%. Those who move individually think that to be the easier and more effective method. The urban local government, because of its localness, makes it easier for the individual to initiate contacts with the authority. Here we have the individual vis-à-vis the government. He acts alone; and he determines the timing, target and substance of the act of participation. This type of participation we can call, following Verba and Nie, citizen-initiated contacts. One of the distinctive characteristics of such contacts concerns the scope of the outcome. Only this mode of participation can reasonably be expected to result in a particularised benefit. The individual may contact the authority about some general social problems, but usually such contacts are made about some particular problem affecting only himself or his family. In a town or a city an individual can have several referent points for such personal contacts by which he transmits his demands and interests. When we explored how and whom do the people in Medinipur approach individually about the civic problems they face, we found a wide variation among our respondents in this respect. Some preferred to meet their own ward councillor, some approached any of the other elected councillors or the Chairman, some contacted the bureaucracy in the municipal board or those in the district administration, a section of the respondents tried to bring their problems into the notice of the local press, while others approached the leaders of the political parties. However, the above methods employed by the people were not exclusive to one another. It was not so that one who contacted his respective ward councillor, never approached any other elected councillor or the bureaucracy and so on. Still, in the course of our interview, we could make out some degree of preference attached by the individual actors to one or the other of the above methods, which he usually resorted to. On the basis of that, a variation amongst our respondents in the ways and targets of citizen-initiated contacts can be noticed. The data about the same is represented in the following table.

25 Verba and Nie, Participation in America, 1972, p.47.
Table 5.4 Various ways of Citizens – Initiated contacts in Medinipur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways of citizens-initiated contacts</th>
<th>Adopted by no. of people (out of 70)*</th>
<th>Per cent of total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacting one’s own ward councillor</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contracting any other councillor or the Chairman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting the Municipal Bureaucracy</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>12.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting officials in the District/State Administration</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting the local press</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>08.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting the leaders of political parties</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* N.B.: As only 70 out of 105 respondents contacted individually.
Source: Personal interview of the citizens.

The above data is about 70 out of 105 of our respondents. For, as stated earlier, 70 of the total respondents adopted the method of personal contacts at various levels of political authority to transmit their grievances. It appears from our data that of the various ways of citizens-contacts, majorities of the people prefer to approach their respective ward councillors with their problems. This is because the councillor, in most of the cases, is personally known to the individual, easily accessible and is supposed to be well aware of the problems of the ward he represents. In such cases, personal relationship between the individual and his representative often counts more than party political allegiance and loyalty. All the elected representatives in a municipal body usually are not equally conversant about the problems in their locality and not equally effective in their role-performance as policy-makers. This leads an individual citizen to contact an elected councillor beyond his own ward, who may be more influential and effective as a contact person to solve his problems. Such contacts develop both on and across party affiliations. For, in local politics (and for that matter in Medinipur), personal factor is no less significant than political ones. Some of our respondents met directly or through some agents (councillors or party leaders) the
Chairman of Medinipur Municipality to convey their demands. As the Chairman—an elected people’s representative—leads the team of policy-makers in the city, people those who have the right access prefer to contact this highest echelon of the city-government for fulfilment of their interests.

The city government in Medinipur—and for that matter any other urban local government in West Bengal—consists of the elected people’s representatives (the municipal councillors) as well as the permanent executives. Policies made and implemented by the municipal authority involve both these components of the government. Individuals contacting municipal bureaucracy for redressal of their problems are thus nothing unusual. However, the common citizens generally have minimum access to the bureaucracy and little idea about the pros and cons of its institutional structure and style of functioning. As a result, often they are in a fix where to knock and whom to approach to get the desired result. In Medinipur thus we find, only around 13% of the respondents contact the municipal bureaucracy on issues of their civic amenities. The functional jurisdiction of urban local government in West Bengal is not completely insulated from the sphere of higher level administration. The pattern of urban governance in Medinipur is no exception. There are arenas and issues where functional responsibility and administrative jurisdiction of the municipality and the district/state administration overlap. Maintenance and repairing of roads and transport facilities within the town of Medinipur can be cited as two of such instances. Separate stretches of the same road, for example, are looked after by different levels of authority—local and state. To speak of traffic within the town, while movement of slower vehicles like rickshaws are vigiled by the municipal authority, flow of heavier public vehicles like buses and lorries are managed by the state motor vehicles department. Thus, citizens in Medinipur town also have to approach higher level administration to get required benefits in addition to contacting their local government.

An elected urban local government functioning in a democratic set up is expected to be ‘responsive’ to public needs and demands. And to be really so, it must honour public opinion. Newspaper is an important medium, among others,
through which people can ventilate their views about the political process. It plays an important role in forming and expressing public opinion. In most of the medium and small towns in West Bengal, publication of one or more local newspapers (daily or weekly) is a common feature. Such papers mainly cater to the local needs and cover local issues. Two such weeklies and one daily newspaper (all in Bengali) are published from Medinipur town. Scanning the last ten years’ issues of two such local papers \textsuperscript{26} we have found that problems concerning urban governance and management and people’s needs and demands regarding civic services and facilities in the town have quite regularly featured in these papers. A section of the city people in Medinipur uses this channel to transmit their demands to the authority. Around 9 percent of our respondents approach the local press in this respect. Their views are expressed either in forms of ‘letters to the editor’ or news items. As these papers have a more or less moderate number of circulation within the town, people’s voices can hopefully reach the desired target.

Local democracy in West Bengal is no longer party-less democracy. That notion of the past came to an end with the extension of universal adult suffrage in the arenas of urban local government during the mid 60s. Electoral process necessitated direct participation of political parties and urban politics could not remain insulated from party politics. Naturally, political party leaders have become one of the significant actors in the political process of a city or a town. As a result, they have also become a referent point of citizens-initiated contact. In Medinipur, 14.25% of our respondents contact party leaders for redressal of their grievances. Here, political loyalties matter more than mere personal relationship.

**Collective Action: The Neighbourhood Association.**

Thus, from the above analysis we find that the city people in Medinipur resort to a number of ways for transmitting their demands individually to the

\textsuperscript{26} Medinipur Samachar (in Bengali, weekly) and, Dainik Upatyaka (in Bengali, daily).
authority. And around 67% (70 out of 105) of our respondents move in individual capacity. Collective action is performed by less than even one-fourth of the respondents. One of the reasons for this perhaps is the absence of adequate institutional arrangements — voluntary groups or neighbourhood association for example — in Medinipur town. The importance of the collective efforts of the individuals in the local process cannot, however, be neglected. When a citizen joins in a collectivity and cooperates with others — either in informal groups or in formal organisations — it reduces the likelihood that the political activity will be aimed at some benefit particularised to him alone. Thus cooperative activity is more likely to be relevant to outcomes of a somewhat collective nature, though the outcome may affect a group in the society rather than the entire collectivity.

In their study of five American cities Berry, Portney and Thomson have shown that neighbourhood associations could be quite effective for collective and cooperative action by the citizens and thus, in promoting participatory democracy. This study was taken up in the context of a steady decline in the rate of political participation by American citizens between 1960 and 1980. The proportion of adults voting steadily dropped. At stake was something much more fundamental: the nature of citizenship in America. Too many Americans defined the responsibilities of citizenship as beginning and ending with voting. The antidote to this was thought to be the building of communities where neighbours talk to each other about politics. Reform must move beyond getting more people into private voting booths to getting more people to public forums where they can work with their neighbours to solve the problems of their community. The five cities studied — Birmingham, Dayton, Portland (Oregon), St. Paul and San Antonio — represented examples of how cities can reach out to their neighbourhoods and successfully incorporate the participation of average citizens into policy-making. In each of these cities neighbourhood organisations are the primary agent of political dialogue and citizen influence. All of them have

developed a type of 'neighbourhood system' as a significant step towards strong democracy. And the study reveals that the system works. 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. The primary decision-making tool in neighbourhood associations is discussion among the community residents who attend the regular open meetings. Thus neighbourhood associations are viewed as institutions that are well suited to the face-to-face interaction that can nurture cooperative behaviour.

The Indian Scenario

Such studies in the Indian context are lacking. In fact, the issue of citizen's participation in urban local politics in Indian cities and towns itself has remained a much less highlighted area of research by political scientists. Research on urban politics in India has long been left largely to public administration specialists whose major attention was devoted to the formal institutions of urban government and administration. As a result, studies focussing primarily on urban political processes in India rather than on formal legal institutions were significantly absent. While empirical political studies in India grew in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s much of these efforts have been directed to election studies. The act of 'participation' by citizens was narrowly and wrongfully equated only with the casting of votes at regular intervals. The multidimensionality of political participation was neglected. Such election studies also could not do justice to urban politics, for elections at that level have been mostly infrequent and irregular. During a long period since independence, most of the urban local bodies in India remained under excessive state supervision and control, often as superseded or suspended bodies lacking autonomy and ineffective as self-governing institutions. Naturally, not much of popular participation – either through the electoral process or by other modes – could be generated in the Indian cities.

Of the few studies on local level elections in the Indian cities, Sharma and Jangam's work on Bombay throws some light on the nature of political affiliations
and voting behaviour of the citizen.\textsuperscript{28} They in their study of elections in Bombay Municipal Corporation found that community issues had better appeal to the urban voters than the civic issues. They concluded that the good performance of the minority parties in the elections was mainly due to communal (caste/religion) appeals. Bhamri and Verma in their study on five municipal towns — Ajmer, Alwar, Bikaner, Jaipur and Kota — in Rajasthan, have made an attempt to analyse and understand the complex behaviour of the urban voter.\textsuperscript{29} They found that political leaders occupying high positions in state government and the party were involved in local elections. In fact, political parties wanted to extend their areas of influence and the municipal institutions provided them an important base of power.

Other Studies

Among the studies which have looked at the issue of ‘participation’ in a much broader perspective, Peter Mayer’s is worth mentioning.\textsuperscript{30} He has examined the political culture of two ‘similar’ cities, both representative of their regions, viz. Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh and Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu and showed that how pattern of political culture affects the nature of political processes in the two cities. Jabalpur has on the whole a ‘subject’ political culture, one in which citizens are reasonably informed about politics and participate in it, at least in terms of voting. This participation is, however, not supported either by the belief that this is important or that the individual is likely to have any important impact on political outcomes. Tiruchirapalli, in contrast, is characterised by a ‘participant’ political culture with high levels of information, feelings of efficacy and a firm sense of the importance of participation. We can, in this respect, characterise the political


culture of the town of Medinipur as a 'participatory-subject' one where in spite of some 'subject' elements, the 'participatory' aspect is dominating.

The awareness of the people about the urban political process can enhance their participation. Bijoyini Mohanty in her study of Bhubaneswar Municipality in Orissa 31 has dealt with the issue of awareness, interest and participation of citizens, their response to municipal election and women's participation in Bhubaneswar city politics. M.A. Hussain takes up a broader perspective in his study of urban political process in general and political participation in particular in the city of Meerut in Western Uttar Pradesh. 32 The specific emphasis is on the changes occurring in the socio-economic structure of the population, its effect upon the pattern of power distribution and the ultimate impact of these changes on the process of decision-making concerning the community problems. The question of social participation in urban neighbourhoods in India has been dealt with by Subhas Chandra in his study of the city of Kanpur. 33 The work examines the nature of urban social participation as an indicator of the nature of urbanism. It operationalises social participation on two main dimensions — formal and informal. The study has been conducted in three neighbourhoods — an old village assimilated in the heart of the city, a new labour colony and an upper class residential area. On the basis of a comparative analysis of these three areas, the author tries to develop a model of Indian urbanism — an attempt perhaps too ambitious. He finds in Kanpur quite remarkable persistence of kinship and caste ties and argues that these provide an important refuge to the people in the face of uncertainties of economic life. He feels that while in the West urbanisation replaced primary relationships by secondary ones, it does not hold good in the Indian reality.

The Case of Medinipur

Coming back to the issue of people's participation in Medinipur city politics, we would like to emphasise on 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 in Medinipur such associations – popularly known as 'Nagarik Samitis' (Citizens' Committees) – can be found operative. These are primarily non-political, non-party associations. In 3 of the 7 larger wards (in terms of area and population) there are more than one such associations in each ward. Each association covers a particular area within a ward – a 'para' or a neighbourhood. In other 4 smaller wards, there is only one Nagarik Samiti for each ward. The membership of such Samitis or associations is open to all adult residents of a particular neighbourhood or the municipal ward, though usually one person from each household joins such committees. The Samitis elect a president, a secretary and an executive committee (the number of persons included in the committee depends upon the total membership) from among its members, normally for a period of one year, to look after and manage their activities. 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 least once in a month. While looking at the working of the few such neighbourhood associations which exist in Medinipur town, we have however found, that they have not generally been very effective in dealing with the problems of the city dwellers and transmitting citizens' grievances to the appropriate authorities. Such associations are loosely organised, meetings are infrequent and often too informal and the degree of people's participation in those is not very encouraging. Many remain unaware of an opportunity to participate and skeptical of their ability to influence the policy decisions. In short, it seems that the very culture of 'neighbourhood associations' found in the West has not developed in our society. Medinipur is just
one example of such cultural differentiation. The lack of available research on the role of neighbourhood associations in Indian urban politics indicates that it is perhaps a general feature in most of the towns and cities in India.

Another feature of people's participation in Medinipur city politics is the variation in the degree of participation on accounts of differences in age and level of education. In fact, as stated earlier, we hypothesised that in Medinipur age and level of education could be two significant independent variables explaining the degree of political participation. When we tested these hypotheses with our data from citizens' interview, they were found to be valid. There were variations on both counts. First, it was revealed that among the respondents those belonging to the middle-age group were most participative while those in the younger and older age-groups participated less. The number of such participants in each age-group and their percentage to total number is presented in Table No. 5.5.

**Table 5.5 Age-group Variation in Citizens' Participation (N=105)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-group</th>
<th>Number of active participants</th>
<th>Percentage to total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 yrs. - 35 yrs.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 yrs. - 50 yrs.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 yrs. and above</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data gathered from citizens' interview.

The data in Table 5.5 above show that the relationship between age and political participation has not been a unilinear one. Up to a certain extent the rate of participation among the people increases with their growing age but then, it comes down when one crosses the middle-age group limit. Thus, we find a curvilinear relationship between the two variables. While 62% of the most actively participative individuals belong to the middle-age group (36 yrs. - 50 yrs.), the younger and the higher age groups count for only 25% and 15% of the
active participants' respectively. The plausible explanation behind this is that the middle-aged persons are the ones mostly concerned with and affected by the day-to-day happenings of the city life. Most of them are working persons, family men, heads of the family or household, either house-owners or tenants, who are mainly to shoulder the responsibilities for maintaining a decent civic life and to look after the basic services and amenities for themselves and their families. Naturally, they become more concerned about the routine problems of civic life, delivery of goods and services by the city authority, and their responsibility as citizens to take part in the process of local governance. Those belonging to the younger generation have a more casual attitude towards the daily hassles of city life. They are either yet to shoulder the responsibilities of family life or are more engaged in search of jobs and with other preoccupations. Thinking seriously about the performance of the municipal authority and participating actively in the process of city politics consume only a portion of their usual time-schedule. The older people participate even less as they have developed a kind of cynicism towards life in general and matters political in particular. They generally opine that nothing can be done to correct the inefficiency, maladministration and corruption in the functioning of the city government. They blame an overall erosion of the value-system in society and the lack of honest, efficient and responsible political leadership for the maladies of civic life. Such an attitude keeps them away from the arena of city politics.

Secondly, political participation of the city people in Medinipur is affected by their level of education. We found that the rate of participation was highest among those mostly educated. Those with lower levels of education participated less. It should be mentioned here, that for the present study, the concept of 'educated' has

*By 'active participants' are meant, in the present context, the people who transmit their demands to the authority, make public contracts, join pressure groups, support or protest the policies and so on, on a regular basis.*
been operationalised to mean the level of formal institutional education an individual receives. The level of education has been found to be directly related with the degree of political participation. The increase in the former has led to the increase in the latter. We present below our data in a tabular form:

**Table 5.6 Variations in People's Level of Education and Degree of Political Participation (N=105)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People's level of education</th>
<th>Number of active participants</th>
<th>Percentage of total number (105)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upto Higher Secondary (Passed)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Secondary to Graduation</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Graduation</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Data gathered from citizens-interview*

The data in Table 5.6 reveal that those who participate most in the political process (55.2% of the respondents) have received the highest level of education. The number of active participants is lowest (11.5%) amongst those having the lowest level of education. It is also found that higher levels of education have steadily led to a gradual increase in the degree of participation. Such correlation between the two variables is perhaps due to the fact that more educated a person is more aware he becomes of the society and world around him. Education leads to general consciousness in the individual about his role as a social and political animal. And this consciousness engenders in him the responsibilities of the citizen who would value the act of 'participation' in a democratic society. Increase in the level of education thus, through developing political consciousness, results in a higher degree of political participation by the individual. Political consciousness here works as an intervening variable. This holds true for the people in Medinipur also.

**Voting as Participation**

Discussions on political participation usually invariably invite the issues of election and the electoral process. No doubt, in the present-day democratic polity, the electoral system has been one of the major mediums of political participation.
by the citizens. However, as stated earlier in this chapter, studies on political participation has often meant simply an analysis of the voting behaviour of the individuals. The arena of urban politics in India has not remained free from this tendency. A majority of the researches on participation at the local level have made themselves confined to election studies.

The present study is not intended primarily to focus on and analyse the voting behaviour of the city people in elections to the urban local body. Voting is but one highly episodic element of democratic life. Democracy involves wider participation in the process of governance. Responsible citizenship requires involvement far beyond casting an occasional ballot. In comparison to most other forms of political participation, voting requires relatively little effort or reflection. It is too meagre an act to build citizenship. Voting is a solitary act that does little to develop a sense of community. Notwithstanding the necessity of the electoral process in running a representative democracy, we would like to emphasise that if people's acts of participation remain limited to the casting of votes alone, that does not help much in strengthening democracy. Often during election-times, people can be found to be very enthusiastic about exercising their democratic right to vote, while between elections they seldom participate in the political process. It is important that citizens elect representatives to govern them. But if they think their citizen-responsibility ends there and remain passive towards and unbothered about politics between elections, the mere act of voting can yield little towards participatory democracy. Besides voting, the citizens should take active initiative in the processes of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies. They should try to transmit their demands and interests to the policy-makers, act to influence the policy-making process and keep a vigil upon the city managers so that public policies could be responsive to individual and community needs. Democracy demands such wider participation, which may involve, for example, contacting politicians or government officials, joining pressure groups, attending meetings, signing petitions or demonstrating. Voting is thus just one but not the only component of political participation.
The proponents of local democracy argue that people's participation can be best promoted at the grassroots level. Taking voting as an index of political participation, reasonably large crowds at booths during local elections may be indicative of high degree of participation. To speak of the West Bengal urban scenario, local body elections have usually drawn a large percentage of voters (sometimes as high as 80%) to electoral booths. The very recent municipal poll, for example, in eleven West Bengal municipal bodies in May 1999 has recorded 75% voter turnout. The crux of the question, however, is whether such active interest of the citizens is also present during non-election periods with regard to other aspects of the act of participation. As stated earlier, ours is not an election study in Medinipur per se. It is not that we consider the electoral process and the act of voting as insignificant and unnecessary. There is no denying the fact that a detailed and in-depth analysis of the voting behaviour of the citizens in a political system – local or other – may contribute to important findings about the political process. But that demands a separate and independent research and is beyond the scope of the present study. We humbly submit this limitation of our research work. However, we have looked at the act of voting in Medinipur city politics as one among other possible acts of participation by the city people and attempted to collect some data on the municipal polls in the city. During 1980 to 1993, elections to Medinipur Municipality were held thrice – in 1981, 1988 and 1993. The 1981 election in Medinipur, as in most other West Bengal municipalities, was held after a long gap of around fifteen years. We have already discussed in some detail about the significance of 1981 elections in Medinipur and West Bengal in the previous chapter. An unusual gap of seven years between the 1981 election and the next was due to the fact that the municipal board constituted in Medinipur after the 1981 election was dissolved by the state government in August 1985 on grounds of maladministration, inefficiency and corruption and an administrator was appointed. And Medinipur Municipality continued to be governed by the state-appointed bureaucrat till the next election held in 1988. The 1993 municipal election in Medinipur was held in due time. The last election to be held in the city government was in July 1998, before which the collection of data for the present work was completed. The period of this research then covers three municipal
elections in the town of Medinipur. In course of citizens’ interview for this study, our respondents were asked about their act of voting in these three municipal elections – whether they voted in all, in some of them, or in none. We found in reply that 75% of them cast their vote in all the three municipal elections, 18% voted in either one or two of the elections, while 7% of the respondents did not take part in any of them. Those who didn’t vote at all were either least bothered about the ongoing political process in their town or utterly frustrated about the inefficiency of the successive city governments since 1980. The people who cast their votes in one or two but not all the three of the municipal elections either did that due to absence of ‘suitable’ candidates to vote for in a particular election or for other ‘personal’ reasons. Those who exercised their right to vote in all the three elections considered it to be one of their primary duties as responsible citizens. 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 of the nature of people’s participation in Medinipur. While the overall rate of participation in the town can be considered as reasonably high, a large amount of participatory input is centred on the act of voting only.

To sum up, this chapter has dealt with two major aspects of city politics in Medinipur – the main issues involved and the nature of participation of the city people in the political process. The day-to-day problems of basic civic services and amenities constitute the principal issue-arenas. Efficient delivery of goods and services by the local government is the principal concern of the city dwellers. They seldom perceive their city government having any greater developmental role. The degree to which people are concerned about the civic problems and earnestly seek their solutions affects their rate of participation in the city political process. In Medinipur this rate is moderately high though there are variations among different sections of the people in this regard. The mode of participation by the city people – the way they try to influence the policy-making process – also
varies. Both individual and collective actions are resorted to though the latter has been much less significant. This is due to lack of adequate institutional arrangements and the absence of the culture of cooperative and collective activity in the town. Mention of a recent development in the arena of urban governance in West Bengal may not be out of context here. The West Bengal Municipal Act 1993, in pursuance of the spirit and provisions of the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, has provided for the constitution of ward committees in each of the municipal bodies. This has been made mandatory. The process has just started in Medinipur after the last elected municipal body was constituted by the 1998 election. And that was incidentally the first election in the town after the new West Bengal Municipal Act came into force. We can hope that constitution of such ward committees in each of the municipal wards can usher in a neighbourhood feeling and lead to increased amount of collective and cooperative citizen behaviour in the political process.

We have tried to find out that how the preferences of the citizen in Medinipur are communicated upward to those who make governmental decisions. What remains to be seen is how the decision-makers perform? Do their policy-decisions reflect people's preferences – their demands and interests? It has been commonly argued that participation by people in the political process makes the government responsive. Does that hold good for Medinipur? How far the policy-makers in Medinipur town have been effective in solving the civic problems and being responsive to public demands and preferences? An inquiry into these constitutes another major dimension of the process of city politics in Medinipur. The output of the people's participation input has to be looked into. We take up this task in the subsequent chapter.