The Policy-Makers and Policy-Making

Introduction

The very origin of modern local government – that is a local institution with some amount of discretion in local affairs and at least some elements of democratically elected political bodies – was part of the libertarian trends in the first half of the 19th century. Liberty for the local communities to develop according to their own preferences free of central interference was a powerful ideological element in the introduction of local government systems in most Western countries. Local self-government was perceived to be an expression of freedom in society. In colonial India, however, (urban) local self-government institutions ushered in during the course of anti-imperialist struggle and due to the mounting pressure of the nationalist movement. Though the context was different, it was also an urge for freedom – freedom from the alien rule. The value of local autonomy or municipal freedom has, however, changed content over time throughout the world.

The change might be described as a shift from a concept of freedom from something – that is communities and districts free from interference by central civil servants – to a question of freedom to do something – that is, to take actions in order to solve communal problems.¹

Urban local governments are for governing the towns and the cities. No doubt,

they differ in what they govern – ranging from small townships of few families to cities and provinces of millions. But the more important and significant question is – how they govern. How efficiently the urban local bodies can handle the needs and demands of the community and work for the production of public benefits? In fact, in addition to the component of ‘participation’, the concept of local self-government embodies the value of ‘efficiency’. A basic argument for maintaining and strengthening the institutions of local government has been that, being an expression of the local community, elected and politically responsible bodies at the local level have the necessary knowledge to deal with local issues and to transform needs into political action. Thus, it can be truly ‘responsive’ to people’s demands and able to contribute to the provision of local needs through the delivery of services. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the proponents of participatory democracy argue that people’s participation in the local political process leads to responsiveness in the working of the local government. Efficiency, responsiveness and participation thus constitute three essential attributes of local government. These are the values and principles on which the local institutions are based. However, the realities of local government may not always correspond to the ideal. Local service production by an urban government, for example, may not be in accord with the demand of the people and it may be a far cry from meeting the needs of the community.

Here, in this chapter, we will try to examine how far the working of the urban local government in the town of Medinipur resembles the political ideals of such institutions. Are the policy-makers in Medinipur ‘responsive’ to public demands? Does the Medinipur Municipality perform efficiently the task of delivering civic goods and services? Can it effectively allocate the values among the citizens? These are the major questions, which have been dealt with in this chapter. Literatures on local government reflect concerns for efficient, effective and responsive delivery of local services. It is argued that responsiveness is brought about through the mechanism of representative democracy. As Leach and Stewart state:

Local Government has been based on representative democracy. The council of the local authority is
constituted by elections, but once so constituted acts on behalf of the electorate, for which actions it can be held to account at the next election.2

The present study attempts to find out whether such mechanism of representative democracy really results in a responsive city government in Medinipur. In the previous chapter, the major demands and interests of the city people in Medinipur were identified and the way the people participate to resolve those was examined. What the city government does in response remains to be reviewed. To use the language of systems theory, we have thus far concentrated on the 'inputs', but have not studied the 'outputs'. Policy decisions of the local government and their consequences can indicate how far those are compatible with the needs of the local community. In the present study, therefore, an attempt has been made to examine the performance of the municipal authority in Medinipur in respect to the major civic problems of the town. Local government’s policies on these major issue areas since 1980 till the formation of the last municipal board in mid-1998 have been taken into consideration.

What does ‘responsiveness’ mean?

Responsiveness is what democracy is supposed to be about. More so in case of local democracy because of its so called ‘localness’ and proximity to the citizens. But responsiveness has rarely been defined precisely. Of the very few such attempts, Verba and Nie’s idea of the concept is a lucid and generally acceptable one. They state that,

the term (responsiveness) refers to a relationship between citizen and government, one in which the citizen articulates certain preferences and/or applies pressure on the government and the government in turn – if it is responsive – attempts to satisfy these preferences.3

We precisely follow this definition in the present study. To have an idea about responsiveness, one then needs measures of citizen preferences and activities as well as information on the attitudes and activities of the policy makers. In order to deal with the question of city-government's responsiveness, we shall use data gathered from interviews with elected municipal councillors in Medinipur. As per the institutional structure of Medinipur Municipality, the body of elected councillors headed by the Chairman - the Chairman-in-Council - commonly called the 'Municipal Board', constitutes the principal policy-making authority. As such, we interviewed thirty such local community leaders. As mentioned earlier (in chapter 4), these thirty councillors belonged to one or more of the four municipal boards constituted in the town during 1981 to 1998, representing all the municipal wards. The interview was conducted with the help of questionnaire having mostly open-ended questions. The data such collected help to comprehend the role performed by the city government in Medinipur.

Leaders can be responsive to citizens in a number of ways. They may be responsive in terms of knowing what the citizens want and agreeing with those priorities. That is, the policy-makers should be aware of the citizens' needs and demands and consider those as major problems of the civic life. The policy-makers may also be responsive in terms of making an effort to deal with citizens' priorities or in 'successfully' dealing with those priorities. Each meaning of responsiveness is important. The last is probably the most meaningful, but at the same time the least accessible to us. For what 'success' entails is difficult to decide precisely. The idea is subjective and whether a particular policy addressed to solve a specific problem is successful or not cannot be decided without detailed community case studies over an extended period of time. This is beyond the scope of the present study. It will, nevertheless, discuss some of the policy measures taken by the city managers in Medinipur to show how far they have been able to solve some of the major problems of the city. That may be an indicator, at least, of the degree of 'success' of such policies. The above meanings of responsiveness imply that there is a relationship between a leader being responsive to public
demands and an efficient performer. An elected representative will honestly think of solving people’s problems only when he lends an ear to their needs and priorities and his own perception of civic problems match with that of the citizens. This will induce in him a seriousness to deal with the problems effectively. The present study will focus on how far the municipal councillors in Medinipur are aware of the citizens’ priorities, whether they agree with the citizenry on the nature and graveness of the civic problems and how much active they are in solving those.

Policy-makers in Medinipur town: How far Responsive?

In examining the nature of policy-responses to public demands in the city politics of Medinipur, we will first take into account the policy-makers’ level of awareness about the citizens’ problems and grievances. The thirty councillors in Medinipur interviewed for the present research were first asked whether they were aware of the problems the citizens in the town face. All answered in the affirmative. It was then inquired that how they become aware of the same. Does the leader go out and ask the people about their problems and grievances? Or does he wait until citizens come to him to present their points of view? A majority of the councillors (19 out of 30) said that they themselves tried to reach to the people to know about their demands and interests, while the rest came to know of the same only when the people approached them. The first lot of leaders was proud to declare that it was their duty to knock at the doors of the city dwellers. Others gave excuse of lack of time due to other preoccupations and insisted that the citizens also have a responsibility to transmit their grievances to their elected representatives. We cross-checked such responses of the leaders with our citizen-respondents. When the citizens were asked that how many of the councillors came to them to know about their problems, they mentioned near about the same numbers as was claimed by the leaders themselves. Thus, as regards the degree of leaders’ awareness about the citizens’ problems – a first measure of leaders’ responsiveness – the councillors in Medinipur can be categorised as moderately responsive.
A second test of leader responsiveness is whether they know which are the citizens' priorities and preferences. Which of the civic problems are rated as more grave and serious by the city people? We have gathered data through citizens' interview about people's perception of the civic problems they face and the priorities they attach to those. This has already been discussed at length in chapter 5 of the present study. To restate the findings here in short, problems such as drinking water supply, sewage and sanitation, road conditions and street lighting and transport facilities within the town were identified as the major ones by the respondants. Other issues came next in order of citizens' priorities. When our leader-respondents were asked whether they were aware of the people's preferences regarding the civic problems, 22 out of 30 councillors (73.3%) answered correctly, while the rest were not sure enough of the same. Thus a substantial majority of the councillors in Medinipur Municipality can be said to be 'responsive' on this second count.

Thirdly, the policy-makers can be judged responsive if their perception of and preferences about the civic problems match with that of the citizenry. In our interviews with the citizens we asked them about the major and important problems facing their communities. The respondents could choose freely which problems to mention. From the answers received we could grade the graveness of the problems according to people's priorities (as mentioned above and also in chapter 5). In our leadership interview we asked a similar question – on the problems the leader himself thought most important. That is, we wanted to know about his preferences and priorities. Again, several answers were recorded. Thus for the citizens we have a measure of the problems to which they give priority to the community. For the leaders we have their schedule of priorities of the civic problems. And we have compared the two to get an idea about the degree of 'concurrence' between the perception and priorities of the citizens and that of the leaders. In the previous chapter, we presented the data from our leadership interview in Medinipur about their perception of civic problems. The priorities of the citizen-respondents were also discussed. Those were taken up separately. Here, we would look at the two sets of data together to get a comparative view. How the two match together is represented in the following table:
Table 6.1 Degree of Concurrence between Citizens' and Leaders' Priorities of Civic Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems/Issues</th>
<th>Priority attached by citizen-respondents (N=105) (Number/ Percentage)</th>
<th>Priority attached by leader-respondents (N=30) (Number/Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drinking Water Supply</td>
<td>105 (100%)</td>
<td>27 (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewage and Sanitation</td>
<td>95 (90%)</td>
<td>24 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage disposal</td>
<td>95 (90%)</td>
<td>22 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road conditions &amp; Maintenance</td>
<td>74 (70%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Lighting</td>
<td>74 (70%)</td>
<td>27 (90%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview of citizens and leaders.

Note: Both the citizen-respondents and individual councillors mentioned more than one problem; hence the inflated number/percentage.

The data in Table 6.1 reveal that the perception of our citizen and leader respondents of the major civic problems in the town of Medinipur more or less conform with each other. Both the citizens and the leaders have identified the same set of issues as the major problems facing the community, though their number of response against each category has not been exactly the same. Such measure of concurrence thus represents a relationship across two independent data sets — the interviews with the citizens in a community and with their elected representatives. On the basis of the different criteria of ‘responsiveness’ of the policy-makers stated above the city-councillors in Medinipur can be viewed as reasonably responsive to public needs and demands. A sizeable majority of the leaders know about the citizens’ problems; they can correctly identify the preferences of the city people; and their own priorities of the civic problems match with that of the citizens. The question remains — do all these lead to sincere efforts by policy-makers to deal with citizens’ problems? However, to evaluate how effectively an elected councillor performs his role as a policy-maker, one should have an idea of what his role exactly is. What the people in a city expect from their representatives in the city hall?
The Role of the Local Representatives

Political Science literature in the West has broadly classified the people's representatives into three types – trustee, delegate and politico. A 'trustee' works as the guardian of the real interest of the city people. He is to be guided by his own judgement and to serve the community as a whole. He no doubt takes initiative in protecting people's interest, but never becomes a mechanical spokesman of the demands of the residents of his own ward. A 'delegate' resides at the opposite pole of the 'trustee. He views himself as the mirror of the opinions and demands of the people in his constituency. His main goal is to serve the people who elect him. His activities are mostly guided by the wishes of his constituents and not by his own conscience and judgement. He believes in the concept - 'vox populi vox dei'. A 'politico' exhibits in himself a pragmatic blending of the first two roles. He is efficient to take decision according to the situation. Sometimes he is the mirror of public opinion, at others he performs as the trustee of the people. He is guided by his instinct of political survival.

The elected representatives in a city government can also be categorised into two different kinds on the basis of the issues they deal with. These two groups are – the 'broad policy' or 'generalist' city fathers and the 'specialist city-fathers'. A generalist city father is more interested in the larger problems of the town or the city. Such general issues as the interest of the different social classes in a city, urban development and renewal, the health scenario, extent of government control, protection of the urban environment are his main concern. As a city father the generalist takes an active part in framing the broad policies for the urban community. He does not have specialised knowledge in any particular area, but possesses an overall experience. A specialist city-father, on the other hand, is one who is concerned with a particular and specific civic problem such as road building, sewerage system, street lighting, purification of drinking water and so on. He acquires a specialised knowledge on one particular subject by being engaged with the same over a long period of time, though he lacks in an overall idea about the larger and more general problems of the city. Such differential role performance by the city fathers has been aptly analysed by Keneth Newton with
reference to the councillors of Birmingham. A work of comparable interest in the Indian context is the political ethnography of Delhi by Philip Oldenburg. In which he has discussed the roles performed by the councillors in Delhi Municipal Corporation.

Some city fathers can be found to be concerned only with the well being of their own wards or constituencies. Problems in other parts or areas of the city seldom draw their attention. Such types of local representatives are called 'ward-focused city fathers'. On the other extreme we find the 'city-focused city fathers' who are concerned with the city as a whole. Not that they neglect the problems in their respective wards, but the question of overall development of the city lies in the centre of their mind-set and role performance. They can be called the 'intellectual sons' of Edmund Burke, who, after being elected a member of British Parliament from Bristol in 1774, declared in a public meeting that as a people's representative his main responsibility was to protect the British interest as a whole and not that of the Bristolites – his electorate – alone.

Thus we find, that the role an elected councillor in a city or town performs can be of different types and dimensions. All the councillors in an elected municipal body may not be performing in the same manner – some may be like a trustee, others a delegate; some are generalists while others specialised; some may be ward-centric while others city-focused. However, sometimes these differential roles may be found clustered together. A councillor for example, may be a trustee, specialised and ward-centric at the same time. What role an elected people's representative will ultimately play in the process of city politics depends to a large extent on the actual context or situation. For there is no denying the fact that leader performance is situational. Though studies on the role performance of

municipal councillors/leaders in the Indian context are quite few in number in comparison with that in the West, some important works are worth mentioning. Donald Rosenthal’s seminal work on the local political processes in the cities of Poona and Agra was a pioneering one. Based on the method of empirical field investigation, his study analysed, among other things, the activities the municipal political leaders undertake as part of their larger community responsibility, and the interactions of elected and administrative officials in promoting or managing local level conflicts. He finds that limited resource and few alternatives to decision-makers at the local level rule out all but marginal innovations. Another major work of similar interest is Ali Ashraf’s comparative study of three cities — Calcutta, Kanpur and Ahmedabad. Ashraf has examined the relation between respective socio-cultural and economic conditions of these three cities on the one hand and the operation of political institutions, leadership and administration in their municipalities on the other. He finds that the quality of performance of the city-government depends more on the ‘political environment’ of the city itself than on external decision-making. S.N. Mishra in his study of the municipal government in the city of Gaya in Bihar, looks at the ability of the councillors to function as efficient and successful leaders. Mishra also tries to evaluate the performance of the councillors in the city council on its various committees and in the decision making process of the council in general.

The present study makes an attempt to look into the role-performance of the elected municipal councillors in the town of Medinipur. The data gathered from leadership interview give us an idea of the way the people’s representatives function and the types of roles they perform. The thirty leader-respondents were asked to mention the factors/considerations motivating their activities as


councillors. We received a varied response to this open-ended question. The factors mentioned by the respondents can be grouped into four and their responses against each can be presented in a tabular form as below:

**Table 6.2 Councillors’ Assessment of the Factors/Considerations Motivating their Activities (According to Preference)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors/Considerations</th>
<th>Responses (Number/Percentage) N=30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1st Priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being of the people of the councillor’s own ward/constituency</td>
<td>22 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being of the town as a whole</td>
<td>12 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party political considerations/whips</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles of conscience</td>
<td>4 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview of councillors.

The data in Table 6.2 reveal that the highest number/percentage (22/73%) of councillors in Medinipur consider the well-being of the residents of their respective wards as their first priority. As elected representatives their principal responsibility is to look after the problems of their electorate. Only a few of the thirty councillors attach lesser priorities in serving their wards in particular. Well-being of the people of the town as a whole is considered as the supreme priority by 12 out of 30 (40%) councillors. A majority of the elected representatives in Medinipur are then primarily ward-focused city fathers and only the rest are city-centered in their attitude and performance. Councillors in the municipal bodies in India are usually political party men as most of them get elected to the civic body as the candidates of one or another political party. Party-less local democracy is now a thing of the past in India. The elected representatives in Medinipur Municipality are no exception. A large majority of them contest the civic poll as party candidates and many of them are even party members. Naturally, party direction or whip is most likely to have its influence on the activities and role performance of the city fathers. And party loyalty can often
become a major consideration to the councillors in carrying out their responsibilities. The data gathered from our interview with municipal leaders in Medinipur show that none of the 30 respondents mentions party political consideration/whip as the principal factor motivating their activities. Only 5 out of 30 (17%) councillors consider it as the second priority. Among the rest, to 7 (23%) it is the third priority while the majority of 18 councillors (60%) attach least importance (4th preference) to such faithfuls' considerations. Thus, though there are party faithfuls, the majority of the municipal councillors in Medinipur are not simply the errand boys of the political party. As for the last of the motivating factors, it is found that only a few – 4 out of 30 (13%) councillors – are guided primarily by the principle of conscience. To 8 councillors it is a second priority while third and last (fourth) preference to this factor is attached by 12 and 6 councillors respectively. Such representatives who are guided by the principle of conscience are more like the 'trustee' type city fathers. In Medinipur, we can then see that a number of factors/considerations motivate the councillors in their performance of duties and accordingly, they can be categorised into different types as stated above.

The councillors – our leaders-respondents – were further asked about their area of work interest. 19 out of 30 (67%) councillors said in response that they were mainly interested in the general issues and problems of larger dimensions. They are then like broad policy or generalist city fathers. The rest 11 councillors (33%) are more specialist in nature as they are mainly concerned with some specific problems of the town or of any ward, such as street lighting, establishment of a municipal market, widening of roads and so on. They can be termed specialist city fathers.

**Medinipur Municipality at Work**

The elected ward representatives constituting the Municipal Board is the authority responsible for urban policy-making in the town of Medinipur. It is in the board meetings that issues are raised, problems discussed and policies reached at. Thus, to comprehend how policy 'outputs' emerge, it is imperative to look into how the municipal board and the Chairman-in-Council in Medinipur Municipality
generally function. In the decade of the 80s, the first municipal election in Medinipur was held in June 1981 and a new municipal board was constituted with 19 elected representatives from the same number of wards in the town. As mentioned earlier (in chapters 4 and 5), this election was held after a gap of about thirteen years in Medinipur (as also in many other municipalities in West Bengal) for reasons more than one. The municipal board that was functioning in Medinipur before mid-1981 was constituted by the 1969 municipal poll and continued for a long span. Since 1981, three more municipal elections have been held in Medinipur – in 1988, 1993 and 1998 – constituting three successive elected municipal councils. To get an idea of how the Board of Councillors in Medinipur functions, we went through the official records of Medinipur Municipality\(^{10}\) for a period of fifteen years since 1980. The resolutions of the board meetings of the municipality during 1980 – 1994 were looked into in depth. This has helped us to have an idea of the frequency of the board meetings, the manner in which the meetings are conducted and the types of issues raised and problems discussed in such meetings.

During the period 1980-1994, a total of 646 board meetings were held in Medinipur Municipality amounting to 43 meetings at an average per year and a little less than 4 per month. The numbers conform to the legal stipulation which states that the Board of Councillors will meet not less than once in every month for transaction of business. However, there is no such minimum limit for meetings per year. The numbers of board meetings held annually have varied over the years. The highest number of such meetings – 61 – were held in 1984, while the year 1985 recorded the lowest number of 15 meetings. The following three years also recorded lesser number of meetings – 30, 32 and 26 respectively – than in other years.\(^{11}\) The reason for only 15 meetings being held in 1985 was the supersession of the elected municipal body by the state government. The elected board which started functioning after the 1981 municipal poll, was dissolved in


\(^{11}\) ibid.
August 1985 on grounds of maladministration, inefficiency and corruption and an administrator was appointed. The municipality continued to be governed by the state-appointed bureaucrat till the next civic poll in the town was held in May 1988 and a fresh elected body was constituted. As an elected municipal board ceased functioning in Medinipur since 1985, the number of board meetings in that and the following years naturally dropped. The bureaucratically controlled city administration was not much interested in functioning in a democratic manner with the active participation of the elected city-councillors. The year 1988 was also the election year for Medinipur Municipality. People’s representatives got engaged in electioneering seeking to renew people’s mandates in their favour; the entire election process and the formation of the new board also took some time and as a result, the existing municipal board could meet for only 26 times – marginally short of the stipulation – in that year. The same occurred in 1993 when the next municipal poll in the town was held. In that year only 36 board meetings could be conducted.

The Board of Councillors in Medinipur Municipality consists of both elected and nominated members. The latter are persons having special knowledge and experience in municipal administration nominated from time to time by the state government. The nominated members do not have the right to vote in the meetings of the municipality. The first meeting of the Board of Councillors in a newly elected municipal body is convened by the District Magistrate or any other Magistrate authorised by him for the election of the Chairman. Henceforth, the Chairman convenes the meeting of the board. Usually the Chairman sets the agenda of the meeting. The quorum necessary for transaction of business in any meeting of the municipality is one-third of the total members of the same. Decisions in the meeting are generally reached by a majority vote of the councillors present and voting. As stated earlier, the Board of Councillors meets not less than once in every month. If needed, special meetings are also convened.

Going through the minutes of the board meetings of Medinipur Municipality it was found that different kinds of issues are discussed in such meetings.
They can be classified into the following broad categories:

a) Problems regarding civic services and amenities as reported by the councillors;

b) Prayers and appeals of individuals or groups for solution of specific individual problem or community issues;

c) Matters relating to internal administration of the Municipality – staff pattern, appointments, employees’ demands;

d) Financial matters – sanctioning of funds, statement of expenditures, budget for short and long term projects, and

e) Issues related to State-Municipal relations – administrative and financial.

The question that naturally comes in mind is – with which kind of the above issues the Municipality remains mostly engaged in its board meetings. To get an idea of that we resorted to a sample test. From the fifteen years period we selected three years – 1982, 1984 and 1991 – in which maximum numbers of meetings – 52, 61 and 57 respectively – were held. Thus, a total of 170 meetings were conducted in these three years. The number of times the different categories of issues were discussed in the meetings has been recorded. And the result shows that in 119 out of 170 meetings (70%), the councillors reported about the civic problems of the towns. On 68 out of 170 occasions (40%), the board meetings dealt with the internal administration of the municipality, while financial matters also were discussed in the same number of meetings. Prayers of individuals or groups regarding solution of civic problems appeared as agenda in 51 of the 170 meetings (30%). Issues regarding State-Municipal relations were dealt with in 34 of the total number of meetings (20%) held during these three years. From the records of these three years, we can then find a particular pattern regarding the types of issues the Municipal Board has been more frequently engaged with. It is true that in the remaining of the fifteen years the number of meetings held on different issues might not have been exactly the same as for the three years we
have counted. Still, taking the three-year period as a sample, we can have some indication about the concerns of the municipality in its task of urban governance.

The data above reveal that a considerable amount of time is spent by the Municipal Board in Medinipur to deal with the issues of civic services and amenities. How effective has been in solving the major civic problems of the town? Have the facilities of urban living improved during the last fifteen years? Let us now have a look at that.

The State of Municipal Services in Medinipur

In this section, we would primarily focus on the major civic issues and problems in the town – supply of drinking water, sewage and sanitation and road conditions. In the previous chapter (Ch.5) we have discussed in detail the nature of these problems. Here, we attempt to inquire whether they have been dealt with effectively.

To start with the problem of drinking water, the daily supply over the years has always fallen short of the daily requirement. Scarcity of pure piped water has been and remains a daily affair for the town dwellers. The performance of the Municipality in this respect is highly unsatisfactory. The master plan for water supply approved by the state government during 1993-94 has not been implemented yet, though a huge amount has already been spent. Steady increase of population in the town over the years has led to enhanced need of pure water supply, but the civic authority has consistently failed to cope with this. Water is a basic requirement for the very survival of human beings. Yet, it has not been possible to provide potable water to all the urban dwellers. The situation is grim also in other cities and towns in India, as well as in other parts of the world. Such statistics that about one billion people in the world do not have access to taps, that in Taiz, Yemen, water arrives in homes only one day in every eight, are shocking.\textsuperscript{12} Although the deficiency in water supply affects all classes of

\textsuperscript{12} Editor's Note, \textit{Urban Age} 6, no. 3 (Winter 1999), p.2.
population, the poor suffer the most. And Medinipur is no exception in this regard.
In the water supply sector, there is need for greater emphasis on improved
management and reduction of the present levels of unaccounted for water. In
Medinipur, huge amount of water disappears from the city system due to leakage
and theft. Leaky pipes occur over time, the municipality spends a lot of money
patching them, but with no long-term or permanent solution. Some water is simply
stolen by people who make illegal connections to the system. Roughly 40 percent
of the water supply in the town remains unaccounted for and a large quantity of it
is wasted. The city authority, therefore, should emphasise on greater
conservation and utilisation of the water already being supplied before going in
for further augmentation of the supply level.

As regards sewage and sanitation, the performance of the city fathers in
Medinipur has not been any better. Nothing much has been done to renovate the
existing drainage system within the town, which is quite inadequate. The authority
has not been able to convert ‘kuccha’ (made of mud) drains into metalled ones and
no underground sewage system has been developed yet. Only 7 to 10 percent of
the total revenue expenditure of the municipality are spent in an average per year
for the drainage system which is not at all sufficient for the purpose. The
municipality, however, has made some breakthrough in sanitation services by
converting a considerable number of service privies into sanitary ones over the
years. The total number of such privies was 14,000 in 1980-81, which was
reduced to 2998 as on March 1995 and till date it has further come down to
1000. Moreover, the city authority off late has undertaken a novel scheme to
convert night soil and garbage into usable fertiliser.

In the sphere of the maintenance of the road system within the town, the
situation has worsened over the years. The existing roads, main corridors and
other main thoroughfares in the town are quite incapable of bearing the present

13 Interview of the Municipal Councillors in Medinipur.
14 Midnapore Municipality, Annual Report, 1994-95, p.35.
15 ibid. p.48.
load of traffic. The municipal authority has failed to develop any secondary road system for vehicular traffic in the town. Traffic management on important roads, market areas and traffic intersections is inefficient. No positive and effective measure could be taken by the municipality to clear the main roads of unauthorised encroachments by shops and hutments. Most of the roads are in need of immediate repairing or widening. But unfortunately, it seems nobody's concern. Works done in this sector by the municipality has always fallen short of the targets over the years. To cite an example, the achievements of the municipality in this regard during 1993-94 is presented in the following table:-

Table 6.3 Performance of Medinipur Municipality on the Roads Sector during 1993-94

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Work</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvement of morrum roads</td>
<td>15 kms.</td>
<td>11.60 kms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance of bituminous roads</td>
<td>15 kms.</td>
<td>1.50 kms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of brick-pavement roads</td>
<td>5 kms.</td>
<td>0.27 kms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction of concrete roads</td>
<td>5 kms.</td>
<td>0.20 kms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The data above clearly indicate the inefficient management of the road system by the civic authority in the town of Medinipur.

Thus, from the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the policy-makers in Medinipur have not been much effective in responding to the needs and demands of the city people. They have failed to provide the basic civic services and amenities efficiently and the improvement of the existing facilities of urban life has become a far cry. The deplorable condition of urban services and the plight of the city dwellers continue. In case of Medinipur, it is then found that though the leaders have been 'responsive' in terms of knowing what the citizens want and agreeing with their priorities, that has not necessarily led to a successful dealing 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
CITIZENS’ AND COUNCILLORS’ PERCEPTION OF THE STATE OF MUNICIPAL SERVICES

There is no denying the fact that the state of civic services in the town of Medinipur is far from satisfactory. In any city or town the urban residents are in constant need of certain services and amenities. And the civic authority is supposed to provide them with those. The democratically elected urban local government is expected to meet out citizens’ demands and interest through its policy outputs. When the expectations fall short of the reality, how the city people look at the performance of their city-government? What explanation the city fathers are to provide for the incapability of the urban local body?

In course of our citizens-interview, we asked the respondents to comment on the state of the municipal services they receive. Their responses have been discussed earlier (in chapter 5) in this work. Nevertheless, it will not be out of point here to restate that. Regarding the performance of the city government in Medinipur over the last 10-15 years in providing the basic civic amenities and solving the major problems. 20 out of the 105 citizen respondents – only 19.1% – opined that the problems have been ‘effectively controlled’ by the municipal authority. 35 of them (33.3%) felt that the state of affairs have ‘remained the same’ during the past years. And 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. Thus, a sizeable majority of them look at the municipal authority as ineffective in providing the basic civic amenities, maintaining a minimum standard of urban living and improving the delivery of the services. The interview data further show that the people have generally blamed inadequate resource mobilisation by the municipality, corruption in the local body, party political factionalism and indifference of the city fathers to local needs for the deplorable condition of the municipal services.

When the leader-respondents were asked to express their views on the
state of municipal services in Medinipur, they generally admitted that most of such services barring a few, have deteriorated over the years. However, their responses varied on any particular municipal service. All the responses have been recorded and the councillors' views on the above is being presented here in a tabular form:

Table 6.4 Councillors' Views on the State of Municipal Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Response (Number/Percentage) N=30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking water supply</td>
<td>21 (70.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roads (Maintenance &amp; repairing)</td>
<td>3 (10.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewage &amp; sanitation</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garbage disposal</td>
<td>10 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street lighting</td>
<td>3 (10.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12 (40.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data gathered from councillors-interview
N.B.: Individual councillors offered more than one response – hence the inflated number/percentage.

The figures in Table 6.4 speak for themselves. It is clear that only in case of one out of six categories of services, the city managers themselves feel that the civic services have improved over the years. Most glaring are the situations in case of road conditions and street lighting. In both cases, as much as 27 out of 30 councillors (90%) are of the opinion that the services have deteriorated. The leaders' perception of the municipality’s performance in sewage and sanitation works has not been much different. Only 7 out of 30 leaders (23.3%) feel that the services have improved while the rest answered in the negative. The situation is slightly better in case of garbage disposal – while 20 out of 30 councillors (66.7%) think that the services have deteriorated, 10 out of 30 (33%) are of the opinion that those have improved. The responses of the councillors against the issue of drinking water supply have been quite interesting. This is the only service which the policy-makers themselves feel have improved over the years. And a substantial majority of 70% of the respondents (21 out of 30) subscribe to such feelings. Only 9 out of 30 (30%) think otherwise. The present researcher,
however, could not find much substance in such rosy picture advanced by the councillors regarding the waterfront. On physical survey of the town and in course of citizens' interview, no sign of major improvements in the water supply system was revealed. The intensity of water crisis has persisted over the years. On further probe, the councillors claiming success on this issue stated that initiation of a new master plan for water supply should be seen as a major improvement. This explains their complacency in this matter. Though the fact is that very little work under the master plan has been done till date.

When the policy-makers in a city or town – who are primarily responsible to convert peoples' demands and interests into effective policy outputs – admit themselves of the failure of the urban local government in that respect, it really exhibits a sorry state of affairs. As we have seen, this has been the case in the town of Medinipur. The councillors in Medinipur Municipality, however, have been honest enough to accept that the city government has lacked in efficient rendering of civic services and amenities. Do they blame anyone for the failure of the local body? Do they analyse the factors responsible? Obviously they do. The data gathered from councillors' interview reveal that. In course of the interview, the councillors mentioned several factors, which they perceived as constraints/problems in carrying out their responsibilities and serving the city people to the best of their abilities. Those are, no doubt, worth discussing. But before that, it would not be out of context to take a brief note of the weaknesses of the urban local bodies in our country in general and the hindrances in their ways of efficient functioning.

**Weaknesses of Municipal Bodies in India**

In India, as in other post-colonial countries, the urban local government system has been basically the continuation of the colonial idea of treating local government institutions as central government agents for local administration.
Urban local government in India thus fell far short of the standard definition of local government having the following characteristics – (i) separate legal existence, (ii) powers of adopting own budget, (iii) authority to allocate substantial resources, (iv) comprehensive functions dealing with local development, and (v) popular mandate and local choice for local development.16 During the post-independence period in India, the idea of democratic decentralisation was not given sufficient importance and the urban local bodies were not assigned rightful place in the governance of the country. They even lacked any constitutional recognition. Almost all the state governments were reluctant to devolve powers to the local level. Excessive state control and repeated acts of supersession of the local bodies by the state governments became a general feature of urban governance. A host of factors have brought about a decline in the organisational capabilities of the urban local bodies in India. These, among other things, include an undefined role resulting in the erosion of their functional domain, an inadequate resource base, a weak executive system, excessive state control and lack of motivated staff and work culture.17 As a result, urban government in India – as in most other Third World countries – is generally condemned as inefficient and corrupt and is regarded as mere ‘garbage-dustbin’ government. Being denied of adequate functions and matching resources to serve the local community, the local bodies have failed to attract competent political leaders and trained career officials. The weakness of the urban local bodies in India is proverbial in regard to finance. There has been no attempt to reserve any tax base for ‘exclusive’ exploitation by the local government. Inelasticity of property tax – a major component of local bodies’ revenue – low collection of property tax proceeds, narrow tax base and absence of well-formulated grants policy have resulted in heavy dependence of urban local bodies on higher-level


government. Such then has been the state of urban governance in India over a long period of time since independence. It was only as late as in the 1990s that a positive step has been taken through the enactment of the 74th Constitution Amendment Act (1992) to do away with the ills and to rejuvenate the urban local bodies in India. Signs of changes are being noticed, but still there are miles to go. In this perspective of the weakness of the urban local bodies in India in general, we will now look at the problems faced by the local government in the town of Medinipur in carrying out its responsibilities.

Constraints Faced by Medinipur Municipality

As stated earlier, the elected councillors – the policy-makers in Medinipur Municipality – have admitted that they fail to render the necessary services to the people as per needs and expectations. They at the same time mentioned of various constraints, which they think, stand in the way of smooth functioning of the municipal body. Their responses have been recorded and are represented in the following table.

Table 6.5 Councillors’ Perception of the Constraints Faced by them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraints</th>
<th>Response Number/Percentage (N=30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequacy of financial resource</td>
<td>21 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of sufficient number of technical staff</td>
<td>12 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifference and negligence of municipal authority</td>
<td>9 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of civic awareness amongst the citizens</td>
<td>20 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive State Control</td>
<td>6 (20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview of councillors
N.B. Individual councillors mentioned more than one constraints – hence the inflated number/percentage.

It appears that paucity of funds available to the municipality is considered to be the main constraint by the councillors. It is true that, a municipal body can successfully carry out its duties and responsibilities when, among other things, it possesses a sound financial resource base. Financial scarcity has been a perennial characteristic of urban bodies in India. Municipalities in West Bengal have been
no exception to that. Thus, when councillors in Medinipur perceive inadequate finance as a major obstacle, apparently that seems quite reasonable. But on further probe it was found that in case of Medinipur Municipality the problem of the so-called fund crunch was more apparent than real. The present researcher has analysed the official records of the Municipality over a period of years (Annual Reports of Midnapore Municipality, 1980-81 to 1994-95) in details, and the data gathered in the process tell a different story. It is found that the total revenue income of the Municipality from different heads has increased regularly over the years. The actual components of revenue income of Medinipur Municipality are the following:

   a) Tax Revenue — including property tax, advertisement tax etc.

   b) Non Tax Revenue — including rent and fees from markets, slaughter houses, supply of water by tankers, building plan sanction, mutation fees etc.

   Transfer from the state on account of shared and assigned tax revenue — such as entertainment tax, motor-vehicle tax, tax on profession, trades and callings and so on.

   d) Grants-in-aid.

   Revenue income of the Municipality on all the above heads has increased during the period 1980-1995.18 What is more revealing is that the municipal authority has over the years failed to mobilise its own resources properly. The percentage of the total revenue of the local body from its own sources has always remained very low. The data presented in the table below indicate that.

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The figures in Table 6.6 further show that the percentage of the Municipality's own revenue to the total revenue income has remained more or less static over the years. This reveals the incapacity of the local body to augment funds by mobilising its own resources. Strikingly, the councillors in their responses did not particularly emphasise this aspect of the reality.

The revenue-expenditure of the local government in Medinipur also shows an upward trend over the years. The major components of the total expenditure incurred by the Municipality are general administration and collection charges, lighting, drainage, water supply, conservancy and miscellaneous, including printing and stationary, legal expenses and so on. When the total revenue expenditure is compared with the total revenue-income of the Municipality, we find that over the years there has been a surplus of revenue over expenditure. The data in Table 6.7 make it clear.

It appears from the data above that except during 1990-91, in all other years, Medinipur Municipality has failed to spend the amount it has received. The year 1985-86 recorded the largest amount of such unutilised money. One significant factor behind this was the supersession of the elected body in August 1985. The bureaucrat-run local body did not take up much of developmental work during the year that followed. The records of the municipality reveal that it has not been able to spend a huge amount of state-grants for development works within the stipulated period in different years and in the process has often earned the
displeasure of the state government. To cite just one example, a report from the Deputy Director of Local Bodies, Burdwan division (vide report dt. 08.9.83) took a serious note of this and warned the Municipality for not utilising the grant within the stipulated time and for the actual purpose. This also indicates that developmental funds are on times diverted by the municipal authority to meet other ends. All said is not to deny that the Municipality faces fund scarcity. It is true that the total amount of money it receives in a particular year proves inadequate to carry out its duties and responsibilities. In fact, most of the Municipalities in West Bengal, or for that matter in India, are plagued with such revenue shortage. But what seems really unfortunate in case of Medinipur Municipality is the failure of the local body even to utilise fully and properly the meagre fund it receives. As a result, the services it has to provide are affected. Interestingly once again, this part of the story also was not told by our leaders-respondents while complaining about resource crunch.

Table 6.7 Increase in Revenue-Income and Revenue Expenditure and the Revenue-Income Gap in Medinipur Municipality (1980-95: In Rupees)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial year</th>
<th>Revenue income</th>
<th>Revenue expenditure</th>
<th>Gap (Revenue-Expenditure)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>49,07,539</td>
<td>43,00,744</td>
<td>+ 6,07,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>81,42,314</td>
<td>51,69,913</td>
<td>+29,72,041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>1,49,43,798</td>
<td>1,55,69,545</td>
<td>-6,25,747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>3,20,57,725</td>
<td>2,18,02,623</td>
<td>+1,02,54,602</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Reports of the Municipality.

The municipal councillors in Medinipur consider lack of civic awareness amongst the city people as the second major obstacle in the way of effective role-performance by the former. They feel that a conscious citizenry is an essential precondition for the success of local democracy. People should be aware of their needs and demands, let the authority know about those, try to influence it to get those solved and attempt to keep a vigil on the performance of the city-fathers. In short, the councillors want the people to ‘participate’ actively in the process of city politics. For they opine that if the town dwellers do not take any interest and
initiative in the process of urban governance, it becomes much harder for the policy-makers to solve their needs and problems. Such argument, no doubt, has substance in it. In our discussion on ‘participation’ in the previous chapter, we mentioned the arguments forwarded by the proponents of participatory democracy – that ‘participation’ entails ‘responsiveness’ on the part of the government. The point we want to make here is that, in Medinipur, the city people in general cannot be said to be too less participatory or unaware of their problems. On the contrary, we have found that their rate of participation is moderately high. The fact is that even such moderate participation has failed to engender a proportionate amount of response on the part of the city managers themselves. Moreover, in course of our citizens-interview we came to know that the very inefficiency of the city-government has made many people apathetic and disinterested in matters of city-politics – thus resulting in a fall out in the degree of their participation.

The third important constraint perceived by the people’s representative is the lack of sufficient number of technical staff in the municipality. 12 out of 30 leader-respondents (40%) mentioned this factor. They are quite correct in their perception in this respect. The municipal authority really suffers from the dearth of adequate number of skilled personnel to help it in its works. However, another related issue in this respect – not mentioned by the councillors – is the large number of non-technical, lower-graded general employees in the municipality, who are often found to be in ‘disguised unemployment’. This has really been a burden to the local body and a large sum of money has to be spent by it yearly to maintain this non-productive contingent. As a result, spending on other more useful sectors are affected.

As regards the ‘indifference and negligence of municipal authority’ – mentioned as an obstacle by 9 out of 30 councillors – the people’s representatives were not very categorical in their answers. In course of interview they simply stated that the municipality does not take too much initiative and is not active enough to solve the existing civic problems and to improve the quality of urban living. On further inquiry about what they actually meant by ‘indifference’ and ‘negligence’, the councillors failed to provide any specific or satisfactory reply.
Lastly, control and supervision by the state government in the functioning of the local body was seen as a constraint by 20% of the respondents (6 out of 30). The councillors stated that in the existing legal-administrative structure, the higher level government has the scope to interfere in the working of the local body and to dictate terms. It has often resulted in centralisation of power, which goes against the ethos of local autonomy. Medinipur Municipality, as the city fathers feel, could not escape such interventions by the state government and as such, its proper functioning has been affected.

It is evident from the above discussion that Medinipur Municipality faces almost the same kinds of obstacles in carrying out its responsibilities as are generally found in case of other urban local bodies in the country. Lack of constitutional recognition, undefined role, paucity of funds, inadequacy of skilled personnel, excessive state control and supervision and lack of motivated staff have been such common constraints. What particularly concerns us in case of Medinipur, is the in-built incapacity of the municipal authority - its lethargy to mobilise own resources, inability to spend its funds to the fullest capacity, lack of initiative on the part of the policy-makers and failure to streamline the staff pattern. To add to this list, we should also mention the lack of work culture in the Municipality. The present researcher, in course of his long hours of work in the municipal office over years for collection of data, has gathered an impression of total dissatisfaction with the work atmosphere in that place. Demonstrations, slogan shouting, processions during the office hours both inside and outside the Municipal office have been the regular features affecting all kinds of serious business.

The ongoing discussion in this chapter makes it clear that the city government in Medinipur has not been much effective in solving the major or problems of the city people. Policy-decisions of the local government and their consequences have not been compatible with the needs of the local community. Sincere efforts on the part of the policy-makers to tackle the civic problems have been lacking. Though the city people are found to be moderately 'participative',
their actions do not always lead to 'responsive' policy outputs on the part of the urban government. This is obviously due to a number of constraining factors as we have already examined. The inefficiency of the municipal authority has been looked at critically both by the citizens and the policy makers. The elected and politically responsible local body in the town of Medinipur has not been able to transform people's needs into political actions. Local service production, in most cases, has not been in accord with the demands of the people and meeting the needs of the community has been a far cry.

In the face of such failure of local self-governing institution what should we suggest? Should we talk of doing away with elected local bodies and sending them to exile? Are we to recommend transferring of the tasks of local service delivery to higher level of governments, to any nominated body of specialists, to para-statal organisations and so on? If yes, should that be simply on grounds of good governance? The answer to all this is a definite no. For if we do otherwise, that would be rejecting democracy. The essence of democracy lies in the local self-governing institutions. Local self-government is an expression of freedom in society. Good government cannot be a substitute to self-government. What then should be done is to attempt to revitalise and rejuvenate the urban self-governing institutions so that those can be more effective, more responsive and more democratic. It is true for all decaying municipal bodies in general as well as for Medinipur Municipality in particular. The policy-makers – the elected people's representatives – should think anew of their duties and responsibilities. As governments the world over move toward more participatory approaches to problem solving and management, the local level of government increasingly represents one of the most important elements in this transition. Elected peoples' representatives in cities or towns are a direct link to the general citizenship. Traditionally their role has been limited to managing city budgets and making isolated political decisions that do not necessarily take into account people-centred

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priorities. This role is changing—though not at the same pace and in the same way—all around the world in response to decentralisation. The people's representatives in the city-government of Medinipur must respond to this changing scenario. They have to realise that there is no school for councillors. They learn their job on the job, on the streets. And the more they know the streets, the more they learn. Seeking out different ingredients and trying new recipes should metaphorically be part of every councillor's daily routine. If they can face this new challenge, the urban local government may emerge as a self-governing, autonomous and people-centered institution aimed at promoting good life. And this is essential, as local government can be the only solution to local problems.

Local government is in close physical proximity to the public, this allows it to practice various participatory approaches, try out new ideas, and implement small-scale incremental initiatives—stimulating access and choice, stimulating a sense of belonging on the part of each community member, and adapting potential solutions to the local context.20

It is true that many obstacles prevent effective functioning of the urban local bodies and full implementation of the initiatives of the people's representatives. These include excessive state control and centralisation that result in a lack of administrative, technical and financial autonomy at the local level; resistance to change; lack of technical capacity; corruption; partisan politics and a lack of trust among levels of government. What is of interest is then, how far the urban bodies at the local level are able to operate with some degree of autonomy or discretion from other levels. For autonomy is essential to maintain the democratic nature of the local bodies and to enable them to act for themselves unfettered by constraints. The important question is can city politics be autonomous. Do the urban local bodies in India enjoy any amount of autonomy? What has been the experience of city politics in Medinipur in particular? In the following part of our discussion we make an attempt to look into these issues.

20 ibid
The Autonomy of City Politics

The Oxford English Dictionary attaches two meanings to its definition of 'autonomy' — self-governing and independence. The notion of self-government is a long-standing idea in normative writing about local government. As regards the second element in the definition — the idea of independence — it is abundantly clear from the experience of the last century that local governments everywhere lack independence from other agencies. Indeed, the very notion of increasing economic, social and political interdependence represents a key element in most modern thinking about present day societies and their conditions. In such a perspective, the idea of any local government having complete independence is not sound enough. Nevertheless, a concern with local autonomy is important because autonomy is at the heart of the very justification of most systems of elected local government. If local governments lack the ability to determine for themselves the mix of local goods and services, then, it is argued, they are no more than an administrative arm of the central state and the election of the local representatives serves little purpose. A critical test of democracy is local autonomy. High levels of local autonomy might enhance local responsiveness and accountability. Local autonomous city governments will be closer to their citizens, more responsive to their demands, producing as a result a greater congruence between those demands and the public policies designed to meet them. However, in the modern state the idea of local government exerting complete autonomy in their activities is largely impractical. In the modern context, most of the urban local governments operate within an environment which is more or less constrained — more or less decentralised. The less constrained and more decentralised the system, the more autonomy might city governments enjoy in practice. As Wolman and Goldsmith state, the potential for local autonomy is


22 Ibid.
likely to vary from country to country, for 'reasons relating to differences in either national, economic, political or social systems and processes or to local governmental institutional characteristics'. On the basis of their analysis of British and American experience; they conclude that local governments in both countries possess autonomy in limited, but not unimportant, spheres. Peterson viewed local politics as limited politics. Writing in the period of the fiscal crises of such American cities as New York, Cleveland. Chicago and elsewhere of the mid-1970s, he found that local governments in practice had little opportunity to influence well being and as a result, in a modern federal system like the United States, only the federal government could affect redistributive policies relating to welfare.

Urban Politics in India: How Far Autonomous?

In the above perspective, the question of the autonomy of the urban local bodies in India can be examined. There have been some important studies on Indian cities focusing on the aspect of local autonomy. There is no doubt that in the Indian context, the powers of the urban local government are limited and operate under the strict supervision and control of the state government. One of the earliest works dealing with the limited role of the city government and municipal leaders is by Donald Rosenthal. This is an exhaustive study of the local political process in the cities of Poona and Agra. The author finds that urban politics in India is never completely insulated from influences of higher level political process and concludes, that a proper understanding of the operations of a municipal political arena must go beyond the behavioural confines of the locally based actors to the forces existing outside the immediate arena and directly or indirectly determining the local political process. A study of Indore politics by Rodney Jones is another

instance of dealing with the question of local autonomy. He finds that considering city politics as coterminous with municipal politics would be misleading and inadequate, for, the answers to questions like who exercises power in city and what one does with such power, would compel one to look outside the framework of municipal politics. As the case of Indore shows, the urban political system is open and penetrated from above. The municipal government in Indore city is comparatively powerless and acenral in urban politics both in form and practice. While political arenas in Indore tend to be functionally divided between the city's politicians and bureaucrats, both in turn stand in a symbiotic relationship with their more prominent counterparts at the state level. Indeed, this provides for vertical integration of city politics with state politics. Jones concludes that Indian urban politics, in terms of its institutional arenas and the bulk of urban governance, consists of state governance in the city. In one of his latter works, Rosenthal identified different models to be utilised for studying urban politics in India. One of those — urban political subsystem model — views urban politics and government as essentially dependent on state politics and considers any attempt to isolate local politics from state politics as essentially misleading.

It seems then, that urban politics in India does not enjoy absolute autonomy. Urban local government institutions and the political process in Indian cities are not free from the influence of higher level government and politics. The extent of such influence and control, however, varies from one state to another in the Indian federal polity depending upon the degree of decentralisation of power, nature of local institutions and the political environment in a particular area.

Local Autonomy: The Case of Medinipur.

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. Formal domination is bureaucratic and governmental. Informal domination is embedded in the political process. The legal-institutional structure of urban governance in West Bengal provides enough room for state supervision and control over urban local bodies, thus reducing their degree of autonomy. It should be kept in mind that noticeable changes in this regard came into force only during the latter half of the 1990s with the enactment of the West Bengal Municipal Act 1993 as a consequence of the 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution. Before that, over a long period of time, the urban local bodies in the state had to function under severe interference by the higher level government. The experience of urban local government in the town of Medinipur has been no different. Since 1980 till date, four elected municipal bodies were constituted in the town. Three out of these four municipal governments have functioned (during 1980-1998) under the provisions of the erstwhile Bengal Municipal Act 1932 which, as stated above, gave very little scope for local autonomy. Only the last Municipal Board Constituted in Medinipur after the civic poll held in 1998, has started functioning under the new Municipal Act (1993), which attempts to do away with the undemocratic provisions relating to control and domination by the state government and seeks to promote the autonomy of the local bodies in different aspects of urban governance. Thus, the period covered in the present study has experienced three successive municipal bodies – constituted in 1981, 1988 and 1993 respectively – functioning under such legal-institutional framework which provided little scope for local initiative and choice and resulted in a system of urban governance penetrated from above.

Medinipur Municipality over the years has lacked the constitutional recognition of local government as an inseparable limb of the total governmental
structure. This has put the municipal body at the mercy of the state government. It has been denied of adequate functions and matching resources to serve the local community. Continuous dependence of the Municipality on the higher-level government for finance has resulted in loss of autonomy for the former. Apart from financial matters, the city government in Medinipur has to depend upon the state government in respect of executive power and personnel management. The municipality needs sanction of higher-level government in matters of (i) appointment or approval of appointment to higher posts, (ii) creation of new posts, (iii) contracts and estimates of higher value, (iv) sanction of budget, (v) formation of cadres of employees, (vi) appointment and transfer of officers of different cadres, and (vii) framing or approval of rules, regulations and bye-laws. So far as the personnel management in the municipality is concerned, there has been no pronounced policy inclination towards either unified or integrated personnel system. Control of the municipal body has been sought to be maintained through management of local executive and technical services by personnel recruited and managed by the state government.

State control over Medinipur Municipality has been unique on another count – the power of the former to supersede or dissolve the elected local bodies. According to the existing legal provisions, dissolution or supersession of the local governments can be resorted to on any or all of the following grounds:

a) incompetence to discharge statutory duties;

b) persistent default in performing duties;

c) excess use or abuse of powers, especially financial powers; and

d) frequent violation of the rules of business.

In all the above cases, it is the ‘opinion’ of the state government that ultimately matters. If the state government forms its own ‘opinion’ at any time for any reason that a particular urban local government has been incapable of performing its functions on any of the above grounds, it is empowered to order either supersession or dissolution of the elected local council. In case of
dissolution, the council’s life is terminated and fresh election is ordered. In case of supersession, the elected council is removed and a nominee of the higher government is appointed as the administrator with full authority to discharge the powers and functions of the local body. The state-level political executive enjoys practically unlimited discretion in putting an end to the life of an elected urban government. For the functional capability of a local authority cannot always be assessed ‘objectively’ and the opinion formed by the state government may very well be ‘subjective’ and it cannot be challenged in any court of law. Supersession is thus not simply governmental control – it signifies the end of local democracy and autonomy. When a new municipal body was constituted in the town of Medinipur as a result of the 1981 civic poll after a gap of about thirteen years, every-one expected it to complete its full term efficiently. Unfortunately, the elected Municipal Board could not live up to the expectations. It could not complete its full term and was ultimately superseded by the state government in August 1985 on grounds of alleged mismanagement, corruption and negligence of the Municipal Board. The then Sub-Divisional Officer of the District was appointed as the administrator of the civic authority. This state of supersession continued for three years till the next municipal election was held in the town in 1988. During this period, the town was being governed by state bureaucracy and the autonomy of the elected council was curbed considerably. Fresh election of the municipal body was also postponed for long. It was due in Medinipur in 1985 but was deferred till 1988. This also helped to sustain state control and supervision over the local body. Thus, as per the formal-legal controls of urban local bodies by higher-level government is concerned, Medinipur Municipality has not been free from such domination. Functioning within the existing legal-institutional framework, the urban local body in the town 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 nature of informal domination embedded in the political process is more difficult to comprehend. A pioneering attempt at this was made by Rodney Jones. Jones in his study of Indore city politics employed the concept of ‘political linkage’ to understand this informal process of domination. He defines ‘political linkage’ as
structured transactions of influence, supports, claims and information between political participants. Linkages can be regarded as transmission channels established between individuals and groups who share some basis for mutual identification and seek common goals.²⁸

Such linkages of personnel and groups are of central concern to Jones’ study. Since the local system constitutes a subsystem within the state political system, he traces the effects of linkages between state and locality on such aspects as local elections, leadership and policy-making, and concludes that local politics in Indore has come to be dominated by the state capital. The arena of city politics in Medinipur is also not free from vertical political linkage. The local political leadership in the town maintains connection with the higher level. Though not in the day to day working of the city government, the state level political leaders often intervene in matters of broad policy decisions to be taken at the local level. Such intervention takes place through the political linkage that exists between the political leaders at the city-level on the one hand and those at the district and state level on the other.²⁹ Political party men at the municipal council – both who are in power and those in opposition – maintain links with their respective higher-level party leadership. Trends of party politics at the state level has its effects upon the local political process. Political party factionalism is an example. Since 1977, the town of Medinipur has never been a stronghold of the ruling Left Front or the CPI(M) in particular. During the last fifteen years, the municipal boards in Medinipur have always been in the hands of the Congress Party. Factional feud at the state-level Congress Party has almost been proverbial and that has often affected the functioning of the party also at the municipal level. Internal rivalry within the party, poor organisational strength, lack of cohesion and common purpose – characteristic of the party at the state-level – have been prominent also

²⁸ Jones, Urban Politics in India, 1974, p.15.
²⁹ Data gathered from interview of the municipal councilors in Medinipur.
in the arena of city politics. The presence of informal domination in the city of Medinipur can be felt in yet another important arena of urban politics – viz. the municipal electoral process. The local level elections have never been completely insulated from the influences of state politics. Starting from the process of selection of party candidates for the civic polls right through the preparation of party manifestos and programmes, poll strategies and electoral campaigns, the intervention of the higher level party leadership over the local ones has been evident on most occasions. And this has been true for all the major political parties irrespective of their ideological stances. Moreover, in the local elections the broader issues of state or even national politics often come in the forefront and local problems of civic administration are relegated to the background. Such issues are focussed and find their place in party programmes and poll campaigns. In all the municipal polls held in Medinipur since 1980, this trend has been noticed. Whether it is desirable or not, city politics in Medinipur has not been able to free itself from such influence of higher level politics.

Thus urban politics in Medinipur is not fully autonomous. It is open and penetrated from above – both formally and informally. Decision-making crucial to the city is often centralised at the higher level. It should be noted here that understanding the nature of autonomy of urban politics in a city or town is a major task. It requires an in-depth analysis of the various aspects of the urban political process and calls for an independent research work. We should be candid enough to state that it was beyond the scope of our present research. Nevertheless, in course of examining the process of policy-making in the city politics of Medinipur and the interactions between the city people and the policy-makers in that process, an attempt has been made to throw some light on the issue of 'autonomy' of urban politics. This is because we consider local autonomy as an significant aspect of urban governance. The observations made in this regard are based on the survey data gathered by the present researcher through interviews of citizens and policy-makers in Medinipur and from the relevant official records, documents and literature. However, a more comprehensive study of the process of control from higher level and the degree of autonomy in Medinipur city politics is needed. A
comparative study of the political processes in other towns in West Bengal can also be more revealing. That can help us to understand whether the nature of city politics in Medinipur is unique or resembles those in other urban centres in the state. The scope of the present research has been limited in this respect. Future researches in this area may be rewarding.

To sum up, lack of autonomy of the city government in Medinipur definitely affects its functioning. Added to other hindrances and obstacles – discussed at length in this chapter – it has also been a major constraining factor in the city politics. Policy-making in the city as a whole has not been quite responsive to public needs and demands. Both the city people and the city managers need to be more conscious, more active and more involved in the process of urban governance. The citizens should be more participative, while the policy-makers more responsive. Notwithstanding the limited scope and jurisdiction of the urban political system, one should be committed to a civil society stressing the participatory and democratic aspects of urban political life. “Who wants to be president when you can be mayor of the city?” – uttered Fiorello La Guardia, Mayor of New York city, as early as in the 1930s. This rings even truer today. Such is the commitment needed on the part of the city policy-makers for efficient management of urban problems and to facilitate the process of urban transformation aimed at the promotion of good life.

30 Quoted in The Urban Age 4, no.3 (December 1996), p.3.