Chapter - V

The Call of Politics

This chapter enquires into different levels of political awareness and activism among Bengali Muslim women. It is important to understand the contemporary political history of women of a minority community in a secular country and within it, in a state ruled by the Left Front for more than twenty five years.

Women have never been barred from participating in public activities in Islam. Contrary to the widely prevalent idea that the seclusion and suppression of women has been guaranteed by religious scriptures, the Quran encourages both men and women to acquire a serious knowledge of their religion and to attain the position of a Mufti, so that they can help the less fortunate ones to understand the rules of their religion. There is no specific verse in the Quran prohibiting women from participating in public affairs. Two particular statements from the Quran may be cited in this respect to establish that there is no gender bias against women in Islam: “Some should stay behind to instruct themselves in religion and admonish the others when they return, so that they may take heed” and “Ask the knowledgeable if you do not know.”

The gender of the knowledgeable and the scope of the ‘instruction’ or ‘knowledge’ were, perhaps, judiciously left unexplained. This makes it possible for women to enter into new sectors of knowledge and explore non-conventional areas of activity. Politics was generally acknowledged as a legitimate sphere of activity for women since the early days of Islam. On the basis of the evidence of Umm Atiyya as recorded in the Hadith of Bukhari, we may say that the Prophet himself undertook to raise and promote political awareness among women. He also encouraged them to attend public gatherings, like the Id and jumma congregational prayers, which were regarded as general political

1 Such ideas are also sought to be validated on the basis of Quranic verses like “Men have authority over women because god has made the one superior over the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them” (4:34). This tends to make the domain of politics or power an exclusively male preserve entitling the latter to rule over women.
2 Deliverer of formal legal opinions.
3 The Quran, 9:122.
meetings in which important issues concerning the whole nation were discussed and debated. According to Haifaa A. Jawad⁹, political activities of the Muslim women started from the moment they embraced Islam. Many of them had to defend the new religion against fierce opposition from both their families and the society at large, endure hostility and finally leave home in the face of mounting pressure. These, according to Jawad, were all parts of a political activity even as understood in modern terms. The actions of these women implied a challenge to the old political system, the establishment of a new order and a protest against oppression and the denial of freedom of belief and expression. Women did play a direct role at all levels during the life of Muhammad and that of his companions. Among the contemporaries of Muhammad were Asma bint Yazid al-Ansari⁷, who was widely appreciated for her strong personality.

Umme Salama, one of the wives of the Prophet, is particularly remembered for having helped him to solve a crucial political problem. She was instrumental in the making of the Pact of Hudaybiyya.⁸ Aisha, another wife, was also very active in public affairs during the lifetime of the prophet. Her political involvement increased during and after the death of the third Caliph, Uthman. She opposed the fourth Caliph Ali and participated on the side of the nobles and took part in the Battle of the Camel. Safiyya, an aunt of the prophet, also took an active part in battles and is credited with the successful of defence a fortress in Medina at the time of the Battle of the Trench.

We also hear of Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima and granddaughter Zainab, as women in early Islam who participated actively in politics.⁹ Apart from the women directly related to Muhammad, there were also other women in the high circles of that early period achieving public distinction and exercising influence in state affairs⁹. There is also the example of Hurrah Malikah, a woman as the head of a State in Yemen.

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⁹ Syed Ameer Ali, The Spirit of Islam, New Delhi, 1922 Reprint 1978, p 250. “She (Ayesha) commanded her own troops at the Battle of the Camel. Fatima, the daughter of the prophet, took part in the discussions regarding the succession to the Caliphate. The grand daughter of Muhammad, Zainab, the sister of Hussain, shielded her youthful nephew from the Omayyeds after the butchery of Karbela”.  
¹⁰ Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs, New York, 1938, p. 341 refers to al-Khay-zuran, al-Mahdi’s wife and al-Rashid’s mother, Ulayyah, al-Mahdi’s daughter, Zubaida, al-Rashid’s wife and al-Amin’s mother and Buran, al-Mamun’s wife. All these women were politically very active during their times.
during the late 5th/early 6th century Hijra. However, with only a few exceptions like that of Tawaddud, women who rose to political pre-eminence in the early days of Islam came from a privileged background. They were the wife, mother, sister or daughter of an important political personality. The same may also be said of the Muslim women in India. During the medieval period in Indian history the oft-cited Muslim women who shot into political fame, like Raziya and Chand Sultana and Nur Jahan, were already members of the political elite in their capacities as daughters or wives of ruling men. In her work, Women in Mughal India (1526-1748 AD), Rekha Misra devotes two lengthy chapters to discuss the involvement of women in Mughal politics. Women who became politically prominent during the period were inevitably already within the ambit of politics by virtue of their male relatives.

Although they were confined to the topmost tier of the political elite, Muslim women occasionally participated in Indian politics up to the time of Hazrat Mahal in 1857. After the passing of the Government of India Act, 1858 and the acquisition of the Indian territories by the British Crown, we no longer hear of any Muslim woman making any significant political contribution for the next fifty years. The self-esteem of the elite Indian Muslims as members of the former ruling race was hurt and they avoided contact with the new culture. Women were pushed to the inner quarters of the household, as they were believed to be repositories of pristine Islamic culture and values. This, however, could not endure long.

The name of Khairannessa Khatun (death c.1909) of Sirajgunge, then a subdivision of the Dacca Presidency, deserves to be mentioned. She was one of the earliest Bengali Muslim women in the twentieth century who displayed a political interest. She was a schoolteacher and wrote articles like 'Swadeshanurag', in which deep nationalist sentiments, aroused particularly in the context of the Bengal Partition of 1905, were reflected. She was also attached to the Congress and participated in its

12 Philip K Hitti, op cit. p. 342. Tawaddud was a slave girl during the time of al-Rashid, who gained renown for her political acumen.
13 Rekha Misra, Women in Mughal India, 1526-1748 AD. Delhi, 1967. This book has two chapters on Women and Contemporary Politics, 1526-1627 and 1627-1748 AD, pp. 16-58.
14 The same is true for Bengal. For instance, Ghazeti Begum who was instrumental in a plot to bring about the downfall of Sirajuddaula, was his aunt.
15 Khairannessa Khatun. ‘Swadeshanurag’, Article in Nabanur, 1312 BS.
meetings and processions. Her political career reached its peak at least five years before the period which Gail Minault identifies as the “period (1911-24) of Muslim self-assertion in Indian politics, a time when Muslim women were just beginning to be involved in political action”. Other historians, like Mukhtar Zaman and Azra Asghar Ali, dealing with the politicisation of Indian Muslim women, have also marked the arousal of political interest among Muslim women from the 1920s. This was, as they have shown, a result of “the growing interest in modern (English) education among the women of the Ashraf families and their social interaction with the women of the other communities which “changed their social outlook”.

It was also during this period that women’s organisations started to emerge. The leadership was mainly in the hands of the educated, elite women. In Chapter 1, I referred to the All-India Muslim Women’s Conference and the Women’s Central Subcommittee of the AIML. It is noteworthy that Muslim women who represented Bengal on this subcommittee belonged to the Urdu-speaking elite. While on the one hand, Muslim women showed an interest in the communal politics of the AIML from the late thirties, it also deserves to be noted that another section of Muslim women had, since the foundation of the AIWC, taken an interest in issues which were gender specific, and hence transcended communitarian interests.

18 Mukhtar Zaman, Students’ Role in the Pakistan Movement, Karachi, 1978, p. 54 states “political consciousness among the Muslim women of the subcontinent in the modern sense, dates back roughly to the 1920s”.
19 Azra Asghar Ali, The Emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women, Karachi, 2000, p. 205 stated “the role of these women can be seen as a part of a continuous struggle which had started after the First World War with them seeking a greater role in the public arena.”
20 Ibid, p.197.
21 Ibid.
22 Mention may be made of at least three women’s organisations, namely, Women’s Indian Association, National Council of Women in India and All India Women’s Conference which started working between 1917 and 1927.
23 The idea of associating Muslim women with the League was considered during the Lucknow session of the AIML in October 1937. The first session of the All India Muslim Students’ Federation held at Calcutta December 29, 1937 was attended by a woman, Jahanara Hazarika, from Assam. This was before the Women’s Central Subcommittee was constituted in the Patna session of the AIML, December 26-29, 1938.
We may mention the reaction to the Child Marriage Restraint Act or Sarda Act (1929) in this regard. Hindu and Muslim women of Bengal had also successfully taken up a united stand in their evidence before the Indian Franchise Committee in 1931. Considering the fact that the property qualification would enfranchise only 41,000 women out of an adult population of 11.2 million, they demanded the enfranchisement of literate women who were above twenty-one years old. Some important observations emerge from an analysis of the trends of political participation of Muslim women up to the nineteen forties.

Muslim women’s political participation during this period remained confined to the elite families where men introduced their wives, mothers, sisters or daughters to the political life. It is true that as relatives of these men, women generally acquired a probation in politics at home which equipped them to handle the public activities better. In reality however, their actions remained largely as ‘appendages of their men’. There were two distinctive, though occasionally overlapping, trends in political participation among Muslim women. One was in the domain of gender specific issues which were taken up by the AIWC, and the other marked the involvement in the communitarian politics of the AIML.

Apart from the involvement of Khairanessa or the initiative taken up by Begum Rokeya, the involvement of Bengali Muslim women in politics remained very marginal till the forties. Moreover, it could never be dissociated from the feminine ideology of home administration. Begum Shah Nawaz, who participated in the first

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24 As Gail Minault, ‘Purdah Politics’ .... Article in Hanna Papnek, Gail Minault (eds), Separate Worlds, op cit, pp. 256-7 says “In supporting the AIWC’s stand in favour of the Child Marriage (Sarda) Act in the late 1920s Muslim women opposed the anti-Sarda position taken by Muslim politicians like Dr. Ansari and Md. Ali. This is a striking instance of consideration of women’s status and social reform conflicting with their men’s political stance”.

25 Memorandum on the franchise of women by the women of Bengal, Presented to the Indian Franchise Committee, Calcutta, 1932, pp. 1-2.


27 Elizabeth C. Hume, ‘Women’s Part in Modern Movement in India,’ in Moslem World, Vol XXII, No-4, October 1932, p. 363 had noted that “One of the encouraging features in regard to this movement is the fact that Mohammedan, Hindu, Sikh, Parsi and Indian Christian women are showing a united front in their demands for social and educational reforms, meeting in unity and co-operation, with the presiding officer sometimes from the Hindu community and sometimes from the Mohammedan.” Other details of the participation of Muslim women in the AIWC are recorded in Aparna Basu, Bharati Ray (eds), Women’s Struggle: A History of the All India Women’s Conference, New Delhi, 1990.

28 I have in Ch. I referred to the initiative taken by Begum Rokeya in hosting a meeting of the AIMWC in February 1919 in Calcutta.
Round Table Conference in London during November 1930 to discuss constitutional reforms, politely derived the issue of political participation of women from domestic discourse. She stated that women should be given the vote and the chance to deal with the affairs of the nation for which they were eminently equipped through the administrative skills they acquired at home.29

Political work of Muslim women became more strident from the time the Pakistan Resolution was passed at Lahore in 1940. Muslim women from the elite classes of northern and north-western India at that time started participating in processions from that time in greater numbers, which was 'an unprecedented step'30 for many of them and until then, considered to be 'a great risk to their reputation'31. At a huge League demonstration in Lahore on 18 June, 1940, many Muslim women courted arrest. This was another aspect of the new attitude which continued during the course of the whole struggle.32

The Muslim Girl Students' Federation, associated with the All India Muslim League, was formed in Delhi in February 1941. Though Shaista Ikramullah, one of the founder members of the Federation, came from Bengal, she was not a Bengali Muslim in the strict sense of the term. It is also worth mentioning that though the AIML was officially founded in Bengal (Dacca, 1905), activities of the women’s and the girls’ wings of the League, prominent from the forties, remained largely confined to northern and north western India.33

The growing political militancy among Muslim women was legitimised through the formation of the Women’s National Guard under the banner of the Muslim league in 1943. Women in white kurta pyjama and green dupatta, sold badges, collected funds and freely approached strangers. This marked the “violation of the unwritten but

30 S.H. Mirza, op cit, p. 51
31 Ibid.
32 Details of the growing political militancy among Muslim women may be gauged from Shaista Ikramullah, 'Women in Politics', in Quaid-i-Azam and Muslim Women. Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, Karachi, 1976, p. 35.
33 The first Conference of the MGSF was held in Delhi, February 1942 and the second one in Aligarh, 1943.
centuries old rule of purdah and confinement for Muslim women.”34 In a very different vein, at the same time the Mahila Atmaraksa Samiti was formed under Communist initiative in Bengal. In chapter-I, I mentioned that the call of the MARS appealed more to middle class Bengali women, both Hindu and Muslim. Their united efforts at public constructive and welfare work gained momentum during the Bengal Famine of 1943.

The marked communist influence on Muslim women, particularly in Bengal, became a cause of concern to the women activists of the League. This may be gauged from the fact that Begum Qazi Isa, a member of the Women’s Central Subcommittee of the AIML, called upon all Muslim women to join the League and to sever all connections with other women’s organisations. She emphasised that since Muslims of India considered themselves a separate nation, members of the sub-committee should have nothing to do with the All-India Women’s Conference and the communist organisations of women in India35. It is remarkable that while the major responsibility for the 1943 famine relief in Bengal was shouldered by the MARS, women volunteers of the AIML carried on the Bengal Relief Work in Punjab even after 1943.36

Jinnah started taking a direct interest in the political activities of women since 1942. On March 26,1944, he addressed a huge gathering of the Muslim Girl Students’ Federation at the Islamia College for Women, Lahore,37 following which Muslim women started largescale preparations for the forthcoming elections of 1946. Exhilarated by experiences of the election campaign on behalf of her cousin, H S Suhrawardy who stood from Kharagpur in Bengal, Shaista Ikramullah wrote that the elections of 1946 brought many other women to the forefront of public life,38 and that much of the work during the elections was done by women. Begum Aizaz Rasool, Secretary of the Women’s Central Subcommittee, also issued the following statement

36 In response to the appeals of the Women’s Central Subcommittee, the Islamia College for Women, Lahore, arranged a debate on ‘The Bengal Famine’ which was also attended by Muslim girls from Amritsar and Ludhiana. The collection from the sale of tickets was sent to Jinnah. Inquilab. February 12, 1944. The women also brought out processions and collected clothes, food and medicine as donations. February 14-16, 1944 were observed as ‘Bengal Day’ under the supervision of the Relief Committee and the Girl Students’ Federation also arranged dramas, symposia and fairs and played a remarkable role in collecting contributions and donations.
37 Inquilab, March 29, 1944.
to the Press, "It is a matter-of great gratification that Muslim women who are generally supposed to be backward and apathetic, suddenly woke up to their duties and responsibilities and have played a very significant part in these elections. They can justly claim a very large share in the league's success"...

Most politically active Muslim women went away to Pakistan during Partition. Shaista Ikramullah shifted to Pakistan and became a member of its first Constituent Assembly. Bengali Muslim women like Begum Sufiya Kamal and Samsun Nahar Mahmud gained wide renown as activists for women's rights in East Pakistan. Sufiya Kamal rose to fame during the Language Movement in 1952 in East Pakistan. She also led a movement against the Pakistani government's decision to impose a ban on the Tagore Centenary Celebrations in 1961. A decade later in 1971, she was once again a leader of the secessionists during the Bangladesh Liberation War.

If Sufiya Kamal carried her Bengali identity to Pakistan, the political thinking and action of another Bengali Muslim stalwart, Samsun Nahar Mahmud, were primarily based on a communitarian identity. Her political activities in East Pakistan, as an active member of the All Pakistan Women's Association, were centred on the belief that the socio-political advancement of women could be achieved only under the auspices of the state.

Both Sufiya Kamal and Samsun Nahar, along with many others, had achieved their initial breakthrough into political activism during the pre-partition period. I have often referred to the socio-cultural vacuum created in the lives of the Bengali Muslims as a significant portion of them migrated to Pakistan. K N Jehangir writes, "Perhaps the Partition of Bengal is the primary reason to keep Muslim women away from politics. Because many politically active and educated Muslim households left for the then East Pakistan, leaving behind illiterate and relatively passive sections of the community." Although it is true that many 'politically active and educated Muslim

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39 The Eastern Times, April 4, 1946.
40 My analysis of the political activities of Sufiya Kamal and Samsunnahar Mahmud in East Pakistan. Also, Maleka Begum, Banglar Nari Andolan, Dhaka, 1989.
41 K. N. Jehangir, Muslim Women in West Bengal Socio-Economic and Political Status, Calcutta, 1991, p. 119.
households: preferred to migrate, it is at the same time difficult to accept that all Bengali Muslims in the post-1947 West Bengal 'were illiterate and relatively passive'.

With the birth of Pakistan and with the migration of the leading League politicians to that country, the Muslim League, which had successfully mobilized a significant section of women, lost its earlier standing within post-partition India. But, as Muslim women activists of the Communist Party pointed out, Communist Party mobilisation among Bengali Muslims was largely confined to the middle class intellectual and professional categories in Calcutta and Burdwan. My survey reveals that most of these Bengali Muslim communist families did not show any interest in migrating to Pakistan. However, both Jolekha Khatun and Rabiya Begum agreed that, for some time after the partition, they could not expand the support base of the party among middle class Bengali Muslim women.

The suddenness of the political change associated with partition rendered a large section of the middle class Bengali Muslims psychologically unfit to confront it. Reduced overnight to a minority population as a result of the partition, with very little chances of retaliation against any possible attack by the Hindus, and with the memories of the 1946 riots still fresh in their minds, middle class Muslims in West Bengal were not at first politically assertive. In chapter III, I had noted that middle class Bengali Muslims suffered from an adjustment crisis in post-1947 West Bengal. The growing minority complex, due to which they recoiled under the community shield and yielded to the social control of the orthodoxy during the fifties and the sixties, was also noticed in the political field.

Political participation of Bengali Muslims during the post-47 period was slow and cautious. The advent of the democratic system in India with the introduction of a new constitution, however, made it imperative for every citizen to participate in the political process. The political life of Bengali Muslim women, however, was largely

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42 My interviews with
a) Syeda Jolekha Khatun on 08.09.02, Burdwan
b) Rabiya Begum on 31.08.03, Calcutta.
43 Ibid.
44 Article 19 of the Indian constitution which guarantees every individual the right to freedom also includes political freedom within its scope.
limited to the casting of vote in the elections.\textsuperscript{45} Pre-1947 Communist activists like Nasima Banu in Calcutta, Jolekha Khatun in Burdwan, Rabiya Begum of Burdwan (presently settled in Calcutta) and other veteran communist leaders of West Bengal have said that some women of middle class Bengali Muslim families were gradually initiated into the communist movement through men in their families during the post-1947 period. These men had themselves come in touch with the communists, during the Food Movement (1952), or during the movements of middle class professional bodies and trade unions, like that of the school teachers (February 1954), the armed branches of the Calcutta Police (December 1954), the Bank Employees (January 1956), etc. From the late sixties and early seventies, Muslim women also entered into these political realms through their new professional identities.

An analysis of the election results from 1952 show that the left Parties were doing increasingly well in the state. I have already referred to this point in Chapter II. An important institutional change that the Left Front Government brought about from 1977 was in the mode of local government. Though the West Bengal Panchayat Act was passed in 1957 under the constitutional directive to promote panchayati raj, political instability in the State had prevented elections to the panchayats after 1963. A system of democratic elections to local bodies at anchal, block and district levels were freshly instituted and elections to these bodies were held in 1978. Since then, the Panchayats are said to have been instrumental in the promotion of political alertness in rural areas. I explored this with regard to the Bamsor women.

I have interviewed three women in the ‘66 years and above’ age group. Two among them belonged to the middle class\textsuperscript{46} and one to the lower middle class. None of these women studied beyond the primary level and all three displayed a low level of personal interest in politics. Their political participation was limited to casting the vote during the elections in which again, they said that they preferred to go and vote with other women of the family.

I have interviewed eleven women in the ‘46 - 66 years’ age category in Bamsor. Among them, eight women belonged to the middle and three to the lower middle class. Of the eleven women, seven have ‘not studied beyond Cl. X’ (they have dropped out of

\textsuperscript{45} On the basis of an analysis of interviews with women aged around and above sixty years.
\textsuperscript{46} I have referred to one of them, Tahuran Bibi, a little later.
the school at different ages), one woman has a Higher Secondary degree and three women are graduates. All the three graduates, who belong to the middle class, had received some exposure to urban life as a result of their college education. This also resulted in an increased political awareness among them, thus confirming the hypothesis that the level of political awareness of an individual is directly related to the level of education. Though poor and illiterate people are often found to vote in much larger numbers than the educated middle classes, avenues of political exposure through academic institutions, the capacity to analyse through discussion with a wider range of people and watching or reading political reports on the media lead to an increased political awareness among the educated respondents. As students, these women had witnessed political activities of the students’ unions in their colleges, though none of them had then been active in unions.

All eleven women in this category said that they voted in elections. Six among them also said that they attended political meetings held in the village. It is worth noting that among these six women, two used the chadar as a distinctive mark of Islamic identity. The practice of purdah, however, has not prevented their public participation and both women feel that their wearing the chadar was not in any way incompatible with their professed ideology of Marxism. Continued social orthodoxy on the one hand and increased political activism on the other among the Bengali Muslim women of Bamsor mark an interesting amalgam in their lives.

Of the 14 women interviewed in the age group between 26 and 46 years, there are five who have not studied beyond class X; two have passed out from class X but were not graduates; five were graduates, one went up to postgraduate level and one was a professional degree holder.

Schoolteacher Samsera’s husband is a contractor and the joint family runs a business construction material. Samsera belongs to the upper middle class. She has a

47 All the three women mentioned this. There was however not much scope to verify the stated hypothesis in Calcutta and Burdwan, because most of the interviewed women were educated. However, that the level of political awareness was high among the respondents has been noted.

48 These three women have studied in college between 1973 and 1976, when West Bengal was undergoing a period of political instability and violence. Getting involved in politics at that stage was, as Alima Khatun put it ‘very risky’. My interview with Alima Khatun (b. 1954), on 23.10.03, Bamsor.
high level of political awareness, which, according to her, has been acquired partially from the newspapers and television channels and partially through discussion with colleagues and other family members. Though she retains a formal membership of the All Bengal Teachers’ Association and donates to the political fund on various occasions, she considers her political participation to be non-existent, except for voting in the elections. Thus, though her higher level of education and economic solvency exposed her to newer avenues of political information this did not lead to an active political life. This according to her, is ‘a matter of personal choice’ and she prefers to look after the household after school. She finds this more gratifying and has no regrets that she has ‘no surplus time to devote to politics’.

Of the remaining thirteen women in this category, six belong to the middle class and seven to the lower middle class. The general principle that ‘younger the age, the greater the level of political participation’ may be confirmed from the fact that 10 women in this category who said that they were politically active, not only attended political meetings in the village but also attended meetings in Bhatar (the Block headquarter) and in Burdwan town.

Among the five graduate women are Bilkisara Khan, a member of the village panchayat and Mohini Khatun, a member of the Panchayat Samiti. Bilkisara Khan is the only woman member of the village panchayat comprising five members. She was introduced to politics primarily by her elder brother during her years as a student of Bengali Literature (1988-91) in the Burdwan Raj College. Mohini Khatun, who is a graduate from the Vivekananda College, Burdwan, had stayed clear of politics during her student life. She was initiated into politics by her husband in 1998. She is presently a member of the Panchayat Samiti comprising 38 members. There are twelve women in the Samiti among whom Mohini is the only Muslim woman.

In this context, it deserves to be mentioned that most of the interviewed women assessed their own levels of political awareness as high, medium or low. This was, as I have stated before, assessed by the respondents on the basis of keeping themselves informed on political issues through direct participation, keeping track of the latest political developments at the local, district, state and national levels through informal discussions with family members, other relatives, friends or colleagues, through newspaper and television channel reports on political matters. In some cases, they had to be assisted for the purpose by providing some indicators as clues to political awareness, like their awareness of the different political representatives at the local, state or national level, the ideologies of the major political parties, the recent political situation in different parts of the country, etc.

My interview with Samsera Khatun (b.1968) on 25.10.03, Bamsor.

Ibid.
Though Aliya Begum is one of the first Muslim women in the village who displayed political activism during the mid eighties, Bilkis and Mohini are the first women representatives from the village, elected in 2003. Neither Bilkis nor Mohini carries any visible mark of the purdah, like the burqa or the chadar, but both are practising Muslims and try their best to observe the prayers and fasts. Both regard their level of religious performance to be high and feel that they would not have been easily accepted by the members of their rural society, if they had not underlined their religious identity. ⁵²

Both Bilkis and Mohini are immensely grateful to their husbands and in-laws for allowing them the freedom required for political work. For Mohini, this issue is not very relevant because her husband has brought her to politics. But as Bilkis pointed out, “My husband is interested in politics as are my brothers-in-law. But I am the only woman in the family who has ever joined politics and contested elections... Ours is a conservative rural family, but there is total support for me, without which I could not have done anything... Involvement in politics means staying away from the home for long hours trying to solve other people’s problems and then returning home very tired ... it also means that you have to maintain a lot of social contact... with men... all this is not possible if your family is not with you.” ⁵³

Bilkisara’s husband is also a political activist but it appeared from the interview that he was not as influential as Mohini’s husband. Mohini’s political ambitions were well-defined; she expected to be included in the zonal committees of the Youth and Women’s organizations of ‘the party’ soon from her present position as a local committee member. Bilkis sounded a bit frustrated as she said, “There is no one to ‘say’ for me.” ⁵⁴ She feels that she cannot rise above the panchayat level because she does not have strong enough recommendations and political connections.

However, both of them feel that their political work has not only empowered them at home, but has given them a social status hitherto unknown to women in the village. Mohini is a member of the Sishu Nari Unmayan O Tran Committee (Committee

⁵² My interviews with
a) Bilkisara Khan (b. 1969) 26.10.03, Bamsor.
b) Mohini Khatun (b. 1976) 3.11.03, Bamsor.
⁵³ My interview with Bilkisara Khan (b. 1969) 26.10.03, Bamsor.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
for the Development and Relief of Women and Children) of the panchayat samiti. In that capacity, she participated in various awareness campaigns among women. Bilkis feels that women can easily come to her with problems which they can neither share with men nor solve themselves. Bilkis has dealt with many complaints of domestic torture and sexual exploitation of women and has tried to solve them through consultation with other members.

If Samsera Khatun was preoccupied with her domestic work after school, her niece, Zarin Sultana (b. 1983), one of the eight women interviewed in the less than 26 years age category, said she was 'not interested' in politics. An introvert by nature, Zarin prefers to concentrate on her career and spends her leisure at home watching television. Both Samsera and Zarin feel that no one would have objected if they had decided to join politics. They also do not subscribe to the view that "Women should not join politics". For both Samsera and Zarin, non-involvement was a personal decision.

It is worth mentioning that none of the 35 women in Bamsor knew about any Muslim woman in politics before 1947. The earliest example of a woman joining politics that they knew of was Indira Gandhi. The following table showing the level of awareness among the interviewed women in Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor about pre-47 examples of Muslim women joining politics deserves to be mentioned:

Table A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>Not known</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>68 (19.77%)</td>
<td>276 (80.23%)</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>17 (10.90%)</td>
<td>139 (89.10%)</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85 (15.89%)</td>
<td>450 (84.11%)</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My interview with Zarin Sultana (b. 1983) on 26.11.03, Bamsor.

Although overwhelmingly Marxist in their present political affiliation. 25 women in Bamsor mentioned Indira Gandhi as their earliest known example of a woman politician.
This shows that the level of awareness in this regard is generally low among the respondents. A larger percentage of women, however, were more aware in Calcutta than in Burdwan and Bamsor. Most of the 85 women who knew of such instances either personally knew some women who were in politics during the pre-47 period, or had read about them.

It is remarkable that none of the 35 women interviewed in Bamsor voiced the idea that ‘women should not join politics’. Politics was regarded as a legitimate domain of women’s work even among relatively uneducated and older women. Tahuran Bibi, a middle class housewife, around seventy years old, said “women of this village did not know anything about politics. Now we hear that women must go for (political) party meetings and contest elections. I don’t think this is bad in any way – women everywhere are joining politics; girls in our village are no exception.”

Of the 156 women interviewed in Burdwan who are more than 18 years old, eight women gave priority to their political identity. However, some of them were not engaged in politics alone. For example, Najmun Nahar, Commissioner of Ward No. 19 in Burdwan, is also a schoolteacher. But she preferred to be included in the category of political organisers/leaders. Sabina Haq, a college teacher, is an active member of the West Bengal College and University Teachers’ Association (WBCUTA) a professional body with political affiliation. In spite of her political activism, Sabina preferred to be identified as a college teacher, as she did not consider herself to be belonging to the category of leaders. This has been reflected in Table IV of chapter III which shows the break up of the total number of women interviewed on professional lines. Similarly, one of the ten political organisers/leaders interviewed in Calcutta is a lawyer who gave greater importance to her political identity, and was accordingly classified.

The first point to be noted about all these twenty women in their role of political organisers/leaders is that all of them came from political families, and their

57 Tahuran does not know her year of birth. But her eldest son, a local schoolteacher, was born in 1948. Tahuran says she was married when she was ‘ten or twelve years old’. Thus her age was calculated to be around seventy years.
58 My interview with Tahuran Bibi on 18.10.03, Bamsor.
59 It was thus that Jolekha Khatun and Rabiya Begum, former political organizers, have been included in the categories of ‘school teacher’ and ‘housewives’ respectively.
60 Two women in Bamsor, eight women in Burdwan and 10 women in Calcutta have been interviewed in the category of political organizers/leaders.
political work had the support and co-operation of men in their family. It is also remarkable that all of them, aged between 28 and 54 years, were introduced to politics by their fathers, brothers or husbands. Though these women took pride in the fact that they worked independently and made their own decisions autonomously of the male relatives, the fact that they can look up to these men for support in times of crisis adds an extra confidence in their activities.

According to Mehbuba Begum (b. 1954), a political leader in Calcutta, “Being introduced in politics as the wife of someone with a sound political reputation is an extra advantage.”\(^61\) She used to seek her husband’s help to solve problems. As Mehbuba said, “I am in politics and I am a woman. But this does not mean that I am dealing with women’s issues all the time. Even women’s issues are not always confined to women.”\(^62\) Asked for an example, Mehbuba cited the case of a maidservant in her locality (Garden Reach) who had complained of repeated sexual harassment by her employer. The case was brought to Mehbuba who promptly took it up. She found that the accused was a very influential man. Mehbuba had to ask her husband to help her tackle the situation.

Though this phenomenon may not be community specific, all the twenty women interviewed in the category of leaders agreed that they considered family connections important in making advancement in political careers. Thus, while all political women might not be regarded as ‘appendages’\(^63\) of their men, a large part of their political identity was undoubtedly partly dependent on them.

The fact that making an independent career in politics is difficult for women was also mentioned by two women belonging two generations – Syeda Jolekha Khatun (b. 1927) and Dr. Roshenara Begum (b. 1953). Jolekha, a MARS activist, was married to a lawyer in 1948. Though her husband did not interfere with her political life, he had very strong sympathies for the Congress. Gradually she became disillusioned with politics as she felt that she was ‘sometimes deliberately overlooked in matters of

\(^{61}\) My interview with Mehbuba Begum (b. 1954) on 11.7.03, Calcutta.
\(^{62}\) Ibid.
leadership responsibilities' because she did not enjoy ‘personal recommendations’ as ‘somebody’s wife’. 

I have already refereed to Bilkisara Khan’s grievances against Mohini Khatun who had the advantage of her husband’s better political connections in to help her own political career. Dr. Roshenara Begum, had become the general secretary of the students’ union of the Rajabazar Science College as a candidate from the Students’ Federation of India (SFI) during a very difficult period for the CPI(M) in 1974-75. Roshenara said that she felt she could not have made a career in politics without her family connections. Since she did not have any political background in her family at that stage, she quit politics and chose to concentrate on academics.

The second important point to be noted is that of these twenty women in the category of political organisers / leaders, 17 belonged to the CPI(M) (two in Bamsor, seven in Burdwan and eight in Calcutta), one woman each in Burdwan and Calcutta belonged to the Forward Bloc and one woman in Calcutta belonged to the CPI. Although some women expressed their preference for the Congress, Muslim women in leadership roles in the Congress were fewer than those in the Left Parties. Only the Congress MLA, Ruby Noor’s name came up in my interview with the leaders of that party. She was, however, not available for an interview. The Trinomool Party leadership could not cite the name of any Bengali Muslim women in organising / leadership roles. With the partition of the country resulting in the end of overt communal politics of the AIML, the new Bengali Muslim middle class seems to express its preference for the secular ‘Left’ parties.

Another important point is that religious belief and conformism to religio-social practices seem to be high among this sample of political leaders. Only one woman in Burdwan and three in Calcutta among the twenty leaders (i.e., 20% of the total women interviewed) felt that religion was of ‘not much significance’ in their lives. These four women are among those who regarded their level of religious performance to be

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64 My interview with Syeda Jolekha Khatun (b. 1927) on 09.09.02, Burdwan.
65 Ibid.
66 My interview with Dr. Roshenara Begum (b. 1953) on 06.08.03, Burdwan.
67 This is not only true for the leaders. The general support base of the secular left Parties among Bengali Muslims in general has been explained a little later.
occasional'. 68 All the other 16 assessed their level of religious performance as 'regular'. 69 In chapter-III, I referred to Anwara Khatun talking about politics as belonging to the outer domain and using the term 'culture' as synonymous with religious practice. An analysis of the interviews with the twenty women in the category of political organizers / leaders reveals that they consider their religious identity to be an extra advantage which helps them to communicate better with the women of the community and consequently, expand their support base. It was apparent from the interviews that most of the Bengali Muslim women who worked as organizers/ leaders of even the secular left parties consciously used their communitarian identity as political capital.

Najmun Nahar, a public representative from a predominantly Muslim ward in Burdwan explained, “If you are regarded as an outcaste or take great pride in denying your roots, you lose all contacts, acceptability ... the support and consequently, the vote. That would not be wise.” 70

Her statement shows that the communist party ideology in contemporary West Bengal has come a long way from its original stand of total non-conformism and has devised a practical strategy of survival. We can have a glimpse of the earlier ideological standpoint of the communist party from Sediner Katha, the autobiography of Manikuntala Sen, an early Communist woman activist in Bengal. Sediner Katha, as Ranabir Samaddar says, gives us “many an insight into the process where a woman brought up in an environment of religiosity takes to politics”. 71 Her life shows that “the religious and the political were not permanently primary or secondary, their places interchanged” 72 at various points in the course of her life. Manikuntala Sen criticized the Communist Party for laying an excessive stress on atheism. However, the Communist Party in West Bengal today seems to have realized that religious beliefs are not necessarily hindrances to women’s emancipatory politics. This strategic compromise has helped to accommodate more Muslim women in left parties.

68 Table A, Chapter IV
69 Ibid.
70 My interview with Najmun Nahar (b. 1960) on 27.04.03, Burdwan.
72 Ibid.
The following table is intended to give an idea of the break-up of the interviewed women according to the relevance of this chapter:

Table B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Less than 18 years old (a)</th>
<th>More than 18 yrs old (b)</th>
<th>Pol.organisers /leaders among the former category (c) (b-c)</th>
<th>Others (d)</th>
<th>Total (a+b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political awareness was found to be relatively high among the 535 women above 18 years. Most of the women assessed their own level of political awareness.

The information may be represented in the following tabular form:

Table C

(Level of Political Awareness of the Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>186 (54.07%)</td>
<td>97 (28.20%)</td>
<td>61 (17.73%)</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>89 (57.05%)</td>
<td>42 (26.92%)</td>
<td>25 (16.02%)</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>8 (22.86%)</td>
<td>14 (40%)</td>
<td>13 (34.14%)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>283 (52.90%)</td>
<td>153 (28.60%)</td>
<td>99 (18.50%)</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, while only 99 of the 535 women (18.50%) belonging mostly to be lower middle class regarded their level of political awareness to be 'low', rest of the 436 women (81.50%) seemed to be more or less satisfied with their level of political awareness.

Political awareness derived from newspapers, discussions with friends and relatives as well as from the audio-visual medium of television. A considerable number of women in Burdwan and Calcutta (178-33.27%) mentioned the news channels on the television as an important agent enhancing their level of political awareness. It was found that Muslim women from the different socio-economic categories, age groups

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73 These five girls were not interviewed on political issues considering their age.
74 Supra footnote 49.
with different levels of academic qualifications and belonging to various professions portrayed a strange inclination to be informed about political issues which concerned Muslims.

On the one hand, many of them said that they keenly watch the performance of Muslim leaders belonging to different political parties, at the local, state and national levels. They also remain informed about the attitudes of the different political parties towards Muslims, which are sometimes brought to light through the public speeches and comments of the spokespersons of different political parties.

Political awareness also includes remaining aware about the provocative or terrorist activities of different Islamic groups, both within and outside the country. For instance, they kept themselves informed about the news of the Kashmiri militants at the national level, as well as about the Talibani activities in Afghanistan or the attack of 11 September, 2000 on America and the consequences of such events.

They also tried to keep themselves aware about the position of Muslims in international scenario – on the events of the Gulf War and the Iraq war, when these happened.

The urban and the more educated classes expressed their awareness about international issues; the primary reason of such awareness, however, was that these were essentially ‘Muslim’ issues.

Most Muslim women identified themselves with such political issues not merely on the basis of a shared religious fraternity, but from a deeper sense of insecurity about what impact a political event might have on herself or her family. For instance, Jahanara Begum of Burdwan said, “There was a time when the Muslims of East Pakistan would commit excesses on the Hindus there. Their attack on the Hindu women and temples was inevitably believed to start a riot here, in West Bengal. So we (Muslims) had to be extremely cautious about what was happening there”75, thus suggesting the practical necessity of political awareness. She has retained the habit of keeping herself aware of political events, though she describes her personal level of interest in politics, as a desirable sphere of activity, to be low.

75 My interview with Jahanara Begum (b. 1939), 27.2.2003, Burdwan
The level of political awareness was not always related to the level of interest in politics. In a strange contradiction, many women, who regarded their level of political awareness to be adequate, simultaneously regarded their personal level of political interest to be low. This implies that they kept themselves politically aware for reasons other than personal interest. I raised this issue with the women who displayed this contradiction. The interviews reveal a complex minority sentiment at the back of their minds as they try to keep themselves informed about the recent political developments in the country and within the state. This occurs, as I inferred, along with the past experiences as narrated by Jahanara Begum, from a sort of insecurity with the rise of the BJP and the right wing Hindu fundamentalist politics in the national political panorama in more recent times.

My survey was conducted between September 2002 and September 2004. With the memory of the Gujarat riots fresh in their minds, 139 women (25.98%) mentioned that they kept themselves politically updated about "how Muslims were being treated elsewhere in the country".76 Requested to elaborate on what this actually meant, many women said that they try to remain alert about any possibility of attack on them.

All the 535 women aged more then 18 years said that they voted in the elections. It is also a peculiarity that the voting behaviour of the women was always not related to personal interest in the area. While all the women aged above 18 years said that they voted in the elections, all of them did not display an equal level of personal interest in it.77 Although the political choice of the women was not said to be "controlled" by men even in a single instance, most of the women accepted that their political choice was to a very large extent, influenced by the political choice of the family. This was, in most cases, found to be determined by the oldest male member in the family, whose wife and children generally subscribed to his political ideologies. Marriages were also sought to be negotiated with families having similar political

76 At least twelve women exactly used this phrase.
77 In fact there were some women, as I have tried to show slightly later, who, though voted in the elections, said they lacked interest in politics. Their political participation in the voting process was thus motivated by reasons other than personal interest.
inclinations. Not a single instance was found where the political choice of the women varied significantly from the choice of the other members of the family.\textsuperscript{78}

I have in Chapter II tried to analyse why the Congress has failed to live up to the earlier expectations of the Bengali Muslim middle class. The split in the ruling Congress Party in 1965 and the ruthlessness which the new Congress government displayed in the state when it won power again in 1972, also went a long way in the withdrawal of the large support base of the Congress. I have also analysed why the Naxalite Movement generally failed to attract Muslims in their search for a political substitute. Though I did not ask any question about the individual political inclination, on many an occasion the woman expressed her gratitude to the CPI(M) on her own. In some cases, other questions led to this answer.

For instance, when I asked “Why do you vote?”, one hundred and ninety two women (35.89\%) evaded a direct answer. They said that they do so to exercise their fundamental political right, 175 women (32.71\%) said they vote to uphold the values of secularism or to do their bit to ensure that the political parties with a secular ideology remained in power, 127 women (23.74\%) clearly said they voted for the CPI(M). Eighteen women voted for other left Front members, like the CPI and the Forward Bloc. These choices were inevitably ‘influenced’ by other family members. Also 8 women in Burdwan and 15 women in Calcutta expressed a strong inclination in favour of the Congress. This may be represented in a tabular form:

Table D

(Why do you vote?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To exercise a fundamental political right</td>
<td>192(35.89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To uphold the values of secularism and /or to ensure the left parties remained in power</td>
<td>175(32.71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. For the CPI(M)</td>
<td>127(23.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Other left Front allies, CPI, Forward Bloc</td>
<td>23(3.36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. For the Congress</td>
<td>23(4.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>535</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{78} This may be regarded as partially true for Syeda Jolekha Khatun whose political choice was initially different from that of her husband. However, her husband gradually lost interest in politics and Jolekha was able to convince the other members of her family in communism.
Of the 320 women who said they voted for the Left Parties, 98 women (30.63%) mentioned that the left Parties have been successful in creating a secular Bengali public culture. The religious thus being confined to the private, communal differences are reduced to a minimum. This, as Neela Azad and Roshenara Begum pointed out, made matrimonial relations with Hindu families possible.

It is very difficult to distinguish whether a secular Bengali culture leads to the growth of leftist politics or the leftist political milieu inspires the promotion of a secular culture in Bengal. These two factors are interrelated and both were found to be operative among Bengali Muslim women. In some cases, it was found that subscription to a leftist ideology leads to the growth of a secular Bengali culture among them though among others, secular Bengali cultural values led the women to support the left political parties.

All the political parties in West Bengal, as elsewhere, have a separate women’s wing for the mobilization of women. The chief among these women’s wings of the major political parties are the Pashimbanga Mahila Samiti of the CPI, Pachimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti of the CPI(M), Pradesh Congress Mahila Samiti of the Congress, Paschimbanga Agragami Mahila Samiti of the Forward Bloc, Nikhilbanga Mahila Sangha of the RSP, Mahila Sanskritik Sangha of the SUC, Agrani Mahila Parisad of the Workers’ Party, etc. A review of the membership of the State Committees of these organisations and interviews with leaders of various political parties indicate that apart from the CPI(M), the mobilisation of the women’s wings of most of the political parties remains confined to the areas where the organisational network of the respective political parties is strong. Thus the influence of most of the women’s wings is very localised and corresponds to the strength of the general party position.

Some prominent middle class Bengali Muslim women were found among the women’s organisations of the CPI(M), CPI and the Congress at their respective headquarters. However this was generally restricted in view of the facts that:

79 My interviews with Neela Azad (b. 1956) on 16.4.04, Calcutta; Dr. Roshenara Begum (b. 1953) on 05.08.03, Burdwan
a) middle class Bengali Muslim women are not a numerically very conspicuous category of the Bengali population, and

b) still fewer among them take enough interest in politics so as to make an impression on leadership roles.

As the interviews with political organisers/leaders of different political parties reveal, politically the most visible Muslim women belong to the lower economic groups like the vegetable vendors, bidi and paper packet makers who are organised into trade unions. All these political leaders agreed that Bengali Muslim women from the middle class who leave a mark in politics are rare.

Excluding the five girls below 18 years of age and the women in political leadership roles, we have in Table B 334 women in Calcutta, 148 women in Burdwan and 33 women in Bamsor. Among them, 188 women in Calcutta, 82 women in Burdwan and 17 women in Bamsor considered themselves to the politically active. The nature of political activity of the Bengali Muslim women may be represented in the following tabular form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Pol. Organisers /leaders</th>
<th>Politically active</th>
<th>Sometimes Politically active</th>
<th>Not Politically active</th>
<th>Total no of women above 18 Yrs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>10(2.91%)</td>
<td>188(54.65%)</td>
<td>14(4.07%)</td>
<td>132(38.34%)</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>8(5.13%)</td>
<td>82(52.56%)</td>
<td>9(5.77%)</td>
<td>57(36.54%)</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>2(5.71%)</td>
<td>17(48.57%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16(45.71%)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20(3.74%)</td>
<td>287(53.64%)</td>
<td>23(4.37%)</td>
<td>205(38.32%)</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women enumerated as politically active in the above table (Table E) are those who attend political meetings, join sit-in demonstrations, walk in processions and engage in other political activities on a regular basis in the neighbourhood (para) and at other places within their town and city. They do this directly as sympathisers or

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80 They have however been left outside the scope of this research. The nature of political participation of these women were however mostly classified as 'activism' and very few among them acquired leadership roles.
members of political groups and/or as members of professional bodies with political affiliations.

Along with this, 14 women in Calcutta and nine women in Burdwan belonging to both the professional and the housewife categories said that they became politically active only during specific times. They have been classified as 'sometimes politically active' in the above table (Table E). Some of them cited the instance of participating in relief activities\(^{81}\) during the September 2000 flood, a kind of social work carried under political banner. They also became active during the elections, when there is a lot of political work. Since they are known to be ardent sympathisers at other times and during the elections, they are either called by the parties with which they maintain an indirect contact through the male members of their families or themselves volunteer for the political work. They join in fund-raising activities and campaigning from door-to-door in support of the respective candidates, particularly during the campaigning among women.

As Dr. Nasima Khondedkar, who lives in the Baburbag area of Burdwan, says, "People in the locality know me to be a sympathiser... At other times, I can hardly afford time for (political activity in) the neighbourhood".\(^{82}\) She becomes active during the elections and on occasions when particular issues, like flood relief and blood donation, are taken up. If Dr. Nasima Khondekar cannot afford time because of her busy schedule as a practising gynaecologist, Masuda Begum, a housewife, considers herself to be a 'generally introvert'\(^{83}\) woman. However, she too, joins the campaign on the eve of the municipal, assembly and parliamentary elections in support of the CPI(M) candidates from what she herself describes as 'a sense of gratitude'.\(^{84}\) Masuda explains that she witnessed the socio-political anarchy in the state during the early seventies as a young housewife. Her husband who worked in the railways, stayed out of the house for long hours and Masuda felt very insecure, though they lived in a

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\(^{81}\) Though none of them actually visited the flood-stricken areas, they collected funds, dresses and medicine for the purpose of relief work.

\(^{82}\) My interview with Dr. Nasima Khondekar (b. 1960) on 12.08.03, Burdwan.

\(^{83}\) My interview with Masuda Begum (b.1948) on 25.6.03 Burdwan.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

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predominantly Muslim neighbourhood. The ‘goondas’, as she said, came from both communities. With the coming of the Left Front government in power, Masuda feels her daughters grew up in a more peaceful environment, for which she was grateful. She felt that she could not have brought up her daughters “if the socio-political situation of the state had been as it was during the late sixties /early seventies.” Thus, the security that the community offers to give to an individual (through the ghettoised neighbourhoods) is not always considered enough; Muslim women as individuals also look for a larger, more widespread political security on top of what the community is expected to provide to them.

Referring to Table E, if we subtract the total number of politically active women including those who are only occasionally active from the total number of women more than 18 years old, we get the respective numbers of women in Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor, who did not consider themselves politically active. This number comes to 132 in Calcutta [334 - (188+14) = 334-202], 57 in Burdwan [148 - (82+9) = 148 – 91] and 16 in Bamsor (33-17).

The absence of any political activity among these 205 women may be explained in terms of personal and ideological reasons. The following table shows the split up of the total number of interviewed women who said they are not politically active.

Table F
(Reasons why the women are not politically active)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Personal Reasons</th>
<th>Ideological Reasons</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>90(68.18%)</td>
<td>42(31.82%)</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>28(49.12%)</td>
<td>29(50.88%)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamsor</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134(65.37%)</td>
<td>71(34.63%)</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

85 Hooligans and anti-social elements, often sheltered by the politically powerful individuals and groups. There is a theoretical discussion on this category, vis-à-vis the ‘mastans’ in Profulla Roy Chowdhury, *Left Experiment in West Bengal*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 32.
86 My interview with Masuda Begum (b. 1948), op cit.
The two most commonly cited personal reasons are lack of interest in politics\textsuperscript{87} and lack of time for such activities due to excessive pressure of household work. The split up is depicted in the following table:

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Place} & \textbf{No interest} & \textbf{No surplus time} & \textbf{Total} \\
& & (due to pressure of work at home/office) & \\
\hline
Calcutta & 32 & 58 & 90 \\
Burdwan & 9 & 19 & 28 \\
Bamsor & 2 & 14 & 16 \\
\hline
\textbf{Total} & \textbf{43(32.09\%)} & \textbf{91(67.91\%)} & \textbf{134} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{[Personal Reasons why the following women are not politically active]}
\end{table}

The lack of time for politics due to pressure of household work was mentioned both by working women as well as housewives. Most of the 43 women who said they lacked an interest in politics were aged less than 26 years. In Calcutta, 23 out of the 32 women (71.88\%) are aged less than 26 years. In Burdwan, six out of the nine women (66.67\%) who said they ‘lacked interest’ in politics were aged less than 26 years and in Bamsor, one of the two\textsuperscript{88} women was less than 26 years old. Though they cannot be said to be entirely disillusioned with politics, their career seems to be the most important item on the priority list of most of the women belonging to the younger generation. It can, therefore, be concluded that they are not so haunted by the insecurity complex which compels many Muslim women, belonging to the older generation, as to search for an added security through political involvement. Many of these young girls also said that they had no reason to feel insecure because other members of their family were in politics. They postponed possibilities of political involvement to some uncertain future.

These 30 women (23 in Calcutta, six in Burdwan and one in Bamsor) felt that they needed to prepare themselves to find a suitable job and in the interests of that, they should postpone everything else. As Tasnim Akhtar, a final year MA student at the

\textsuperscript{87} The lack of interest is in spite of the fact that all of them vote in the elections and most of them have a considerably high level of political awareness. Twenty six among them considered their political awareness to be high, 11 women regarded it to be medium and only 6 women considered it to be low.

\textsuperscript{88} This was Zarin Sultana, whom I have discussed earlier. The other woman was her uncle’s wife, Samsera Khatun, who has also been discussed.
Calcutta University, said, "(getting involved in) politics is a waste of time.... I would rather like to spend the time preparing for competitive examinations." Tasnim however considers her level of political awareness to be high; she votes in the elections and does not discard the possibility of her future political involvement.

It is also worth noting that many of the 43 women who said that they have no personal interest in politics and 91 women who said they lacked time for politics, however, believed that women should join politics to look after the interests of women. They also believed that Muslim women should join politics to safeguard the particular interests of Muslim women and see that they receive social justice in matters of divorce, inheritance, etc. so that even Muslim men cannot afford to overlook the interests of women.

Fifty eight women in Calcutta, 19 in Burdwan and 14 in Bamsor said that the pressure of their domestic work was too heavy for them to think of anything else. This opinion was evenly spread out among all the categories of the middle class. The domestic workload was not considered to be particularly heavy by those who belonged to the lower middle class or to those living in large joint families.

Even an upper middle class housewife in Metiabruz, Calcutta, Nazme Molla (b.1962) living with her husband and a daughter, with a number of helping hands (cook, maidservant, driver, etc.) does not think that she lacks interest in politics or is ideologically opposed to it. Her husband, a small-scale industrialist running a soap factory, is known to be a political enthusiast in the locality. Nazme Molla knows that he will not raise objections if she takes up social work or politics with serious interest. But she herself does not have 'enough surplus time to devote to politics'.

Sahida Khanam (b.1968) works in a bank. She says, "Of course, I support the idea that women should join politics. The fact that I cannot afford time for it is a different point. Don't confuse them.... Politics is a serious affair – it is not a pastime like going to the club.. you have to give regular time, that is not possible for me after

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89 My interview with Tasnim Akhtar (b.1981) on 18.08.04, Calcutta.
90 My interview with Nazme Molla (b. 1964), on 27.03.2004, Calcutta.
the day’s tiring work at office and at home”. Many other working women shared her opinions.

The 91 women in this category who believed that they could not devote time to politics because of their preoccupation with domestic work confirm the observation of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India that “urban middle class women find their family responsibilities a handicap for political participation”.

Forty Two women in Calcutta and 29 women in Burdwan (vide Table F) who were ideologically opposed to the idea of women joining politics. This represents a contradiction in their position since 62 among them considered their level of political awareness to be high or medium and all of them vote in the elections. Table G shows the split in this category of women to prove that the level of political awareness is not always positively related to an interest in the area. (I have noted before that many women feel compelled to keep themselves politically aware from a sense of insecurity).

Table – H
(The level of political awareness of those ideologically opposed to the idea of women joining politics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Calcutta</th>
<th>Burdwan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth repeating here that no woman in Bamsor expressed any opinion against the political participation of women; thus exploding the myth of the mental passivity of rural women in this case. There were four main elements in the ideological opposition to women joining politics. I have tried to represent it in a tabular form:

Table – I
(Split up of the no. of women who are ideologically opposed to women joining politics)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Calcutta</th>
<th>Burdwan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Politics is a male domain;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women are not</td>
<td>16(38.10%)</td>
<td>12(41.38%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

92 Towards Equality, op cit., p.291
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Calcutta (%)</th>
<th>Burdwan (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Family and children suffer</td>
<td>15 (35.71)</td>
<td>9 (31.03%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Walking in processions, attending meetings, etc. are infra dig</td>
<td>8 (19.05%)</td>
<td>6 (20.69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Forbidden in religion</td>
<td>3 (7.14%)</td>
<td>2 (6.90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table (Table I) shows this split up of the ideological premises of those who were found to be opposed to the idea of women joining politics. Firstly, 16 women in Calcutta (38.10%) and 12 women in Burdwan (41.38%) believe that politics cannot be a respectable occupation for a ‘bhadramahila’. Some of them also said that women are not temperamentally suited for politics which is basically a male domain. The mud slinging that takes place at a personal level in politics was also mentioned to be undesirable for women by some who subscribed to this view.

Fifteen women in Calcutta (36.71%) and nine women in Burdwan (31.03%) think that women should not join politics because their family and children suffer as a result of their staying out of the home for long hours at different times of the day. These women refuse to recognise a woman as an individual, but see her as embedded within her family. The home thus remains “a reality which cannot be allowed to be threatened by the reality outside, it must not be swamped by the struggles raging in the bigger world”.93

Long back, during the discussions of female suffrage in the Bengal Legislative Council in 1921, these points had been brought up by Muslim legislators. Khan Bahadur Maulvi Wasimuddin Ahmed of Pabna had said, “Eve was never created as an entity and juxtaposed by the side of Adam, but she was created out of the rib of Adam for the solace and companionship of Adam... The constitution of her body and inherent periodical disabilities make her essentially unfit for outdoor work or the administration and defence of a country”.94 He went on to say that the political participation of women would emphasize the undesirable cultivation of manly qualities and encourage the neglect of duties at home. There would be discontent with domestic duties among women as a result of her political participation who could then neglect their husbands

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and children “even during illness”.95 It is ironical that even today some women echo such sentiment.

It is again a paradox that some of these women were themselves working women, and some others, not being employed themselves, still expressed their views in favour of employment of women. I raised the point that employment also meant staying out of the home for long hours. The general opinion about this was that jobs for women were acceptable because the additional income ultimately led to greater comfort of the family and children.

It is a strange dichotomy in the present history of Bengali Muslim women that eight women in Calcutta (19.05%) and six women in Burdwan (20.69%) 96 who neither subscribe to the concept of purdah, nor may be regarded as very orthodox in their social practice opposed the idea of political participation of women from a sense of class consciousness. These women considered attending political meetings, walking in processions, etc., beneath their dignity. Their sense of superiority was not based on the idea of subscribing to an elite Muslim culture; but their sense of cultural superiority was a strange admixture of trying to maintain a difference with the ‘low class’ 97 within their community as well as that of others. Neither can their level of political awareness be generalised as ‘low’ nor did all these women belong to the upper middle class. However the mention of the term ‘chhotolok’ by five women, interaction with whom was believed to be unavoidable in politics, proves that these women associated themselves with a superior level of culture and despised politics as it sought to break down the class barriers.

95 I bid. vol : IV, September 5, 1921. p. 450.
96 Fourteen out of the 71 women (19.72%) who were ideologically opposed to the idea of women joining politics thus consider it infra dig.
97 The exact term used to denote the low class associated with a lower cultural level was chhotolok. It could not be probed with what cultural elements they exactly identified themselves in the fear of antagonizing them. Though this remained largely undetermined, it was apparent that they identified themselves with the superior.
It may also be mentioned that six women in this category are working women who are compelled to encounter the 'chhotolok' at their workplaces. But they would not like to interact with them outside it.

Fourthly, three women in Calcutta (7.14%) and two women in Burdwan (6.90%) believed that Islam forbids the political participation of women. One of them, Dilruba Begum of Calcutta, is a 22 years old lower middle class graduate. The other four women are aged between 46 and 66 years of age. Two women in Calcutta and one woman in Burdwan belong to the middle class and one woman each in Calcutta and Burdwan (including Dilruba Begum) belongs to the lower middle class.

It is also noteworthy that one of them, Habiba Khan (b. 1951) is a schoolteacher in the Bondel Gate Area in Calcutta. She is also associated with social work. She sometimes volunteers to teach in an evening school for street children in her locality. She knows that this school is a part of a wider social project taken up by some youth of a particular political party. But Habiba identifies her contribution as social work. She would, under no circumstances, herself engage in political activities or approve of other Muslim women engaging in politics, because she 'knows' that it is strictly forbidden in her religion.

Though only five out of the 535 women (0.93%) subscribe to this view, it carries within it the resonance of a discourse created in pre-47 Bengal. Many Muslim legislators had pointed out in 1921 that religious custom would be threatened if their women joined politics. Purdah upheld religion as Syed Nasim Ali said in 1921, “I ask each and every Muhammadan member of this council to place his hand upon his breast…. whether he wants his zenana should be dragged out of the purdah; and that his purdah system should be abolished gradually". A majority of Muslim legislators had voted against the proposal to permit women to stand as candidates for the legislature on religious grounds in 1930. Although none of these five women practices purdah, their

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98 Three women in Calcutta and 2 women in Burdwan exactly used this term. It is also remarkable that two women in Calcutta belonged to the lower middle class who very consciously sought to maintain a difference with those immediately below them.

99 Like a nurse working in a government hospital.

100 My interview with Habiba Khan (b. 1951) on 14.04.04. Calcutta. None of the 5 women could definitely identify as to where exactly in the religious scriptures is the political participation of women forbidden or what religious scriptures are violated because of it.


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opposition to the idea of women joining politics carries in it the elements of an older, unbroken orthodox tradition.

A survey of the political thinking of contemporary Bengali Muslim middle class women reveal several intricate layers. All the women said they voted in the elections at the local (panchayat, municipality or corporation), state assembly and parliamentary levels and political awareness was found to be relatively high. Only 205 among the 535 women (38.32%), though voted in the election, were found to be politically not active otherwise — either for personal or ideological reasons. However, many among the 134 women who were not politically active for personal reasons supported the idea of women joining politics. The high level of political awareness and activity among middle class Bengali Muslim women was motivated in most cases by an intense feeling of insecurity generated by their minority status. Although a significant number of Muslim women were found to be politically active, very few among them were in leadership roles. In most instances where they assumed leadership roles, they had been introduced to politics and promoted by men.

Bengal Muslim middle class women in Calcutta, Burdwan and Bamsor seemed satisfied with the secular ideology of leftist politics. Secularism was found to be redefined in the present context in which the left political parties accept and accommodate religion within its scope. The ghettoised neighbourhoods, which have grown up during the post independence period in Bengal and are expected to provide collective security to the members of the minority community (as I have shown in Chapter IV) are not always considered adequate. As an additional safeguard, many Bengali Muslims look beyond it and search for security through political options.

Confining the religious difference to the private domain, there is a conscious effort of building up a homogeneous Bengali culture, through secular socio-cultural idioms. Some part of it grows from a genuine commitment to secular Bengali values; some of it, as my survey reveals, is a calculated step devised for acculturation. This is expected to provide them a greater security against the possibility of Hindu attacks on life and property.

Politics is believed to provide both individual and collective security to its followers. Prafulla K. Chakrabarti had noted in the context of the Bengali Hindu that he
“has nearly lost his religious identity, (and) is today known by his professed allegiance to the CPI(M), CPI, RSP, SUC, FB, SP or Congress and his position in society is determined by the position of his party in the State legislature or in parliament and its capacity to distribute patronage among its supporters".\textsuperscript{102} This is also true for Bengali Muslims to a certain extent as they seek to build a ‘new’ socio-cultural identity through political activities during the post-independence period in West Bengal.

However, as the political awareness and participation of Bengali Muslim women in political activities are sometimes motivated by deep-seated insecurities about the possibility of communal riots, the topic of riots has been dealt with separately in the following chapter.