

POLITICS OF URBAN GOVERNMENT

Decision-making at the urban government level is a complex process, involving social, physical and economic problems as well as the exercise of power, together with the influence of political cultures and ideologies. It is often argued that the obstacles in the way of solving urban problems are mainly political. Thus politics is inherent in the urban government. According to E.C. Banfield, it is the "process by which conflict is carried on in terms of public concern, and the political system of a city is the set of formal and informal arrangements (laws, offices, interest-groups, voting procedures, and so on) by which a public or those who act for it, decide or, may be, fail to decide - what is to be done".¹ It follows, then that local urban problems are invariably linked with the local politics, although, most people are not active politically, either in the partisan sense or in taking part in the political matters directly. But it is needless to say that every citizen within an urban area has some kind of contact with those who govern the city or town.² The present Chapter thus seeks to focus upon the nature of politics in the four municipal towns, namely, Balurghat, Raiganj, English Bazar and Old Malda, and its impact on their growth during the period 1977 to 1993. In addition, we may also try to examine the role of the pressure groups and voluntary organizations which attempt to influence the urban government decisions without seeking to become part of the government. Information on these aspects has

been drawn through interviews, observations, dialogue with members of pressure groups and interaction with local political leaders and Councillors.

Section 1 : PARTY POLITICS IN URBAN ADMINISTRATION

The supreme decision-makers in any local urban authority are its elected members. The Councillors who are recruited by the political parties or other social forces, constitute the main political elements in the functioning of the urban government. Councillors and their parties supply the policy guidelines within which officials have to work and reflect more or less effectively the demands and needs of the people they represent. Thus, political parties play a n important role in determining the quality of the man who have occupied this distinguished position in the civic government.

Although the vast majority of urban authorities are now controlled by one or the other of the major national political parties, the local structures and processes of those parties none the less vary widely, and this is reflected in the way in which decisions are taken by individual urban authorities.

The history of the municipal government in these districts from the point of view of the evolution of party politics is not very attractive. This is because, in the pre-independence period, popular interest centred on national politics and leading

Indian politicians as well as the local political leaders were engaged in the freedom struggle against the British imperialist rules. Even after Independence, all the four municipalities had been superseded several times till 1981 and the affairs of the municipalities were being looked after by the administrators appointed by the government.³ As a matter of fact, as far as the four municipalities (namely Balurghat, Raiganj, Englishbazar and Old Malda) are concerned, interest in urban local government did not pick up till 1977 when the Left Front Government came to power in West Bengal. After capturing power in 1977, the Left Front Government, as mentioned elsewhere, took several steps for the smooth functioning of the municipal bodies. This created an impetus among the political parties to play a vital role in the decision-making process of the urban local bodies. The important parties are Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India, Congress(I), Forward Block, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, Communist Organization of India (Marxist-Leninist). An attempt is thus made to examine the nature of politics in these towns with the salient characteristics of their own and the consequences that follow from them for the period 1977 to 1993.

Raiganj

The town of Raiganj occupies a prominent place in the politics of erstwhile West Dinajpur as well as present Uttar Dinajpur District. Located in the lower parts of North Bengal, Raiganj joins the Northern and Southern portions of the State of West Bengal. Raiganj has come up in prominence as a result of the partition of

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India. Traditionally, Congress Party holds a key position in the urban politics of Raiganj. In the pre-Independence period, several Congress leaders organized freedom movement against the British in the region. From the very beginning, these freedom fighters had an impact upon the people of Raiganj town. In the first part of the Post-Independence period, Congress played a crucial role in the politics of municipal administration. The most important development in the pattern of party politics in this town after the 1970s had been the emergence and steady rise of the left-wing forces. Besides C.P.I.(M), C.P.I., R.S.P., and I.B. a new radical left party known as the Communist Organization of India (Marxist-Leninist), was formed which stood in opposition to Congress and other Left parties.

With the introduction of the new municipal enactment in 1980, the municipal election under the Left Front regime was first held on 31st May, 1981, in Raiganj Municipality. The contest was the keenest in the civic election because of the greatly enhanced powers, duties and strength of the Municipal Council. The most striking feature of this election was that Congress as a party boycotted the election, although many Congress members contested the election as Independent candidates. In Raiganj Municipality, these independent candidates captured the municipality, winning 9 seats out of 15. C.P.I.(M) managed to win 5 seats. But the factional differences among the Independents were so great that during the tenure of the Board from 1981 to 1985, several persons held the post of Chairman. Sunil Dhar who

belonged to the C.P.I.(M) Party, was first elected as the Chairman. But after some time, he was removed and Sankar Chakraborty, a Congress(I) leader became the Chairman. But Mr. Chakraborty could not hold the office of the Chairman for long. In a fresh election, Tapan Dutta, who won the election as an Independent candidate was elected as the Chairman. But a few months later, Sankar Chakraborty was again sworn in as the Chairman.⁵ Thus, political instability was the most notable feature of the Raiganj municipal administration during this period.

The next municipal election in Raiganj was held on the 15th June, 1986. The Congress, which had been the strongest political party in Raiganj town in the past, was now divided into two factions, one led by Sankar Chakraborty, and the other by Mohit Sengupta — both of whom indulged in criticising and outwitting each other. A large number of Congress men being denied party tickets, stood as independent candidates.⁶ There were frequent instances of gross indiscipline in the ranks of the Congress Party and a large number of its leaders exhibited rank opportunism in deciding their position as between the rival factions inside the Party. The most remarkable trend of the 1986 election was a serious setback to the Congress. The election outcome was completely different from that of 1981. Of the 16½ seats, 12 went to the C.P.I.(M), including 2 Independents supported by this Party, Congress(I) won only 4 seats and 2 seats had gone to the Independents.⁷ The Congress had suffered because of the popular discontent, partly due to factionalism within the Congress and

partly because of its failure to deliver the goods. Obviously, the people were keen on seeking a democratic alternative and they thought that they had found one in the C.P.I.(M) Party. This was the first time in the history of the Raiganj Municipality where a new democratic experience was launched, with political elements opposed to the traditional post-independence ruling party -- the Congress.⁸ But the C.P.I.(M)-led Municipal Council, despite its ideological differences with Congress could not provide a radically different approach to the management of the civic problems in the town.

After a lapse of five years, the Municipal election of Raiganj was held on the 8th June, 1991.⁹ Following a delimitation of wards, six new wards were added to the municipality by dividing the previous sixteen wards. The most striking feature of this election was that intra-party conflict appeared not only within the Congress but also among the members of the C.P.I.(M) Party. Denial of tickets to some popular partymen led to a revolt both within the Congress (I) and the C.P.I.(M) in some wards.¹⁰ However, the Congress secured absolute majority by winning 12 of the total 22 seats, C.P.I.(M) which had 10 Commissioners, in the last Municipal Board bagged 7 seats, R.S.P.-1 and C.O.I.M-L-2.¹¹ But the political situation in the civic body took a new turn soon after the declaration of election results. A split appeared within the Congress on the 8th July, 1991, when the election of Chairman and Vice-Chairman took place. The stubborn attitude of both the groups, one headed by Mohit Sengupta, and other by Sankar Chakraborty,

with regard to selection of candidates to the posts of Chairman and Vice-Chairman led to a clear-cut division among the Congress(I) ^{council} (Commissioners).¹² As a result of such split, C.P.I.(M), ^{councillor/} (Commissioner), Paritosh Debnath, was elected as Chairman by defeating Mohit Sengupta by a margin of 12-9 votes. In the post of Vice Chairman, the C.P.I.(M) Councillor, Amulya Tarafdar, defeated his Congress rival, Dindayal Kalyani, by a margin of 10 - 9 votes.¹³ Thus, being a minority party within the civic body, the C.P.I.(M) captured the Board. Several Congress(I) state leaders visited the town to resolve the conflict among the Congress(I) Commissioners/^{council} and after a prolonged debate, they reached a consensus. As a result, a no-confidence motion was passed against the C.P.I.(M) -led Municipal Board on 1st Jan., 1992, and on 29th Jan., 1992, in the election of the Chairman, Mohit Sengupta of Congress(I) defeated Harinarayan Ray, an Independent ^{councillor} (Commissioner) supported by C.P.I.(M), by 2 votes. In the election of Vice-Chairman, Dindayal Kalyani, a Congress(I) ^{councillor} defeated his C.P.I.(M) rival, Amulya Tarafdar, by a margin of 12 - 8 votes. The Congress(I) thus snatched the Municipal Council from the C.P.I.(M).¹⁴

The foregoing analysis shows that the decade between 1981 and 1992 witnessed a remarkable development of deep involvement of party politics in the municipal politics of Raiganj the new influentials in the Municipal council who were by and large people engaged in profession, trade and business. In other words, new economic and social forces that emerged as the dominant were represented by merchants and manufacturers among the Bhadrak, such

as owners of oil mills, drug merchants and contractors etc. The emergence of left wing forces as the dominant group in the municipal body of Raiganj was linked with the radicalism of State politics but was too short lived to provide adequate basis for an enduring impact upon its civic administration.

Balurghat

Balurghat town came into existence after the partition of India in 1947. It was a mere village before independence. The town lies on a flat land on the left bank of the river Atrai without any significant variation of contour. The border of Bangladesh is just a few kilometres away from the town, and hence it has a strategic significance. The town at present falls into the Class I category due to its unprecedented growth of population. The most important reason for such exorbitant population growth is that the town is situated right on West Bengal - Bangladesh Border and influx of refugee is enormous. Industry does not play a significant role in the economy of the region. There is not a single large scale industrial unit in Balurghat town owing to the lack of infrastructural facilities. It is the only district town in the State of West Bengal deprived of railway communication. The town is basically an important market centre in the vast rural hinterland.

The early municipal politics of Balurghat was dominated by the Congress Party. During the period from 1951 to 1969, the Congress captured the Municipal Board on three occasions.¹⁵ The

nature of municipal politics took a new turn when the left wing forces, particularly the R.S.P., began to consolidate its position in the region from 1969.¹⁶ In the year 1969, left wing political parties captured the Board by a thumping majority and Congress was completely washed out.¹⁷ Out of 15 seats, the R.S.P. bagged 13 and 2 went to the C.P.I.¹⁸ It was for the first time that the Congress Party lost so badly. However, on the 15th August, 1973, all the R.S.P. Commissioners resigned as a protest against the government decision of withholding the municipal election.¹⁹ The Government thus appointed nine Commissioners to run the municipality which worked from 1973 to 1981. It is remarkable that Congress was in power at the state level from 1972 to 1977. But in the State Assembly Election in 1977, Congress suffered heavily and the Left Front captured power in the State. As a result, political situation of the state underwent a radical transformation after 1977. The political battle between the Congress and the ~~Left Front~~ led Left Front in Balurghat reached a high peak in the municipal election of 1981. The Left Front won overwhelmingly, capturing over 85 per cent of the seats. Out of 15 seats, R.S.P. captured 10 seats, C.P.I.(M) 3 and Independents 2.²⁰ However, Congress was humiliated beyond all expectations, apparently as a result of chronic infighting. Dipankar Banerjee of R.S.P. sworn in as the Chairman and Sourin Lahiri of C.P.I.(M) became the Vice-Chairman of the newly formed council.²¹

The next election in the Balurghat Municipality was held on the 15th June, 1986.²² The pre-poll scene presented a somewhat

different look from that of the last election. Some important events took place after the 1981 election that had their definite impact upon the urban politics of Balurghat. From 1981 to 1985, the Left Front Government took several measures in the field of municipal government in the State. The average allocation of money during the above-mentioned period increased in the state. The Government of West Bengal established some important institutions in the State for the smooth conduct of municipal activities. The most important of these were - Directorate of Local Bodies, Directorate of Engineering, Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies and Central Valuation Board. On the other hand, Balurghat Municipality took some positive steps in the field of urban development, like supply of water to the local citizens, extension and construction of roads, street light fittings, improvement of conservancy and sanitary system, construction of new bus stand, repairment of burning ghat, etc. All these had a positive impact upon the urban citizens of Balurghat. Further, left wing forces, particularly the R.S.P., with its well-organized political strength, were able to create a link with the people at the grass root level. As a result, the R.S.P. appeared as the most powerful party which contested in 10 seats and won all of them. The second successful party was C.P.I.(M). It had put up 3 candidates and won all the seats. The largest number of candidates, 15, were put up by Congress (I), but only 2 were returned.²³ Thus, the Left Front captured the ^{Board/}Council with an impressive majority. Dipankar Banerjee of R.S.P. became the Chairman for the second time and Sunil Kr. Mohanto was sworn in as the Vice-Chairman. One important phenomenon

of this election was that a female candidate of the R.S.P. became a Commissioner ^{for the Council} for the first time in the history of Balurghat Municipal election.²⁴ In Balurghat, R.S.P.

appeared as a constructive political force in the municipal government. Left Front was so united and disciplined that it withstood the pp opposition Commissioners and carried on civic administration valiantly and admirably.

The last municipal election in Balurghat was held on 30th May, 1993.²⁵ Following a delimitation of wards, eight new wards had been added to the Municipality by bringing it into Panchayat area. The most remarkable feature of this election was the division among the Left-Front partners. The political scenerio in the election reached a boiling point with R.S.P. and C.P.I.(M), the two major Left Front partners, vying for supremacy and control of the Municipal Council and the Congress(I) trying to dislodge them from power. Several important leaders visited the town but negotiation for seat-adjustments between the C.P.I.(M) and the R.S.P. failed. Interestingly, the Congress(I) seemed in no mood to cash in on the prevailing rift between the R.S.P. and the C.P.I.(M), as the Party suffered from the traditional groupism over selection of candidate. The issue, which created a storm during the election campaign, was the bifurcation of erstwhile West Dinajpur district. The district was bifurcated into Dakshin (South) and Uttar (North) Dinajpur districts on 1st April, 1992. While the R.S.P. described it as an illogical distribution from

the geographical viewpoint, the C.P.I.(M) argued that bifurcation was a unanimous decision of Left Front Ministry where the R.S.P. had its representative but no objection was raised by the R.S.P. leaders.²⁶ Other Left Front partners, like the C.P.I. and the Forward Block, were also in the fray, and all these represented that Left Front in Balurghat was a divided house.

The outcome of the election reflected a significant change in the party position. The R.S.P. obtained a thumping success with an impressive majority. It had put up 22 candidates and supported 1 Independent, and bagged 16 seats including the Independent candidate, Mr. Amal Chakraborty. The second successful party was the Congress(I) which had put up 23 candidates, of whom 6 succeeded. The position of the C.P.I.(M) was the worst in the election. Out of 23, it could win only 1 seat.²⁷ The B.J.P., the C.P.I. and the F.B. were completely routed.

Evidently, this municipal election revealed two new trends. Firstly, the R.S.P. emerged with a considerable strength in the municipal arena and proved that it had enough capacity to obtain a majority in the Municipal Board. Secondly, the Congress(I) improved its position by winning 6 seats, whereas in the outgoing Municipal Board, it had held only 2 seats. Thirdly, the result of this election depicted the sharp erosion the C.P.I.(M) position.

Municipal politics in Balurghat was controlled by the Bhadrakol Bengali intelligentsia, economically less affluent but

leading citizens and social leaders of ^{the} neighbourhood. In Balurghat, there was a general concern for civic improvement and the difference between the Congress(I) and the left wing parties was one of perspective rather than of commitment. All the parties were committed to Municipal development and good government. All the parties were equally committed to self-government and local autonomy. It is evident that Balurghat Municipal authorities had demonstrated a remarkable degree of competence in dealing with the problems of civic improvement. There was a common understanding that all the parties must work together for civic improvement. This is evident in the unanimous decisions on several issues reached by the civic body in the face of sharp political differences. Finally, all of them had a regard for public rectitude and mutual respect.

English Bazar

No reliable and systematic record of the history of the municipal politics of English Bazar, one of the oldest municipalities in West Bengal, is available. However, in the pre-Independence period, the Congress Party dominated this municipality with different degrees of effectiveness. Its primary preoccupation was to maintain its hold on the municipality for political purposes. The Congress succeeded in arousing and integrating various sections of the people under the banner of its flag and for both civic and political purposes. The Congress worked not merely as a political party engaged exclusively in the

freedom struggle, but also organized positive programmes of social work. From the very beginning, the Party had an effective influence upon the people of Englishbazar, although political development in English Bazar Municipal Government was interrupted several times by the supersession.

In the post-Independence era, Congress continued to enjoy hegemony for two decades. But its popularity began to decline when the Left Front government came to power in the State in 1977. The Left Front, consisting of the C.P.I.(M), the C.P.I., the R.S.P. the Forward Block, the Forward Block(M), and some other parties rapped the Congress in its popularity in the 1981 municipal election, although, according to a decision of the State Congress(I) Committee, Congress(I) as a party boycotted the election. But many Congress(I) members contested in the election as independent candidates. These Independents failed to capture the Municipal Council. The Congress faced a setback and the Left Front for the first time came to power in the English Bazar Municipality. Within the Left Front, the C.P.I.(M), bagged 5 seats, the C.P.I. 2, the R.S.P. 1, and the Forward Block 1, while, on the other hand, the Independents won in 8 seats out of 17. Probhat Acharjee, a senior teacher of Malda College and a C.P.I.(M) Party-member, was sworn in as Chairman and Tarun Das, a C.P.I. leader, became the Vice-Chairman.

The victory of the Left Front in the election of 1981 was a result of the negative vote which the over-enthusiastic rank and file took it as a positive contribution. The people had voted

the Left Front to power due to deep resentment against the Congress which had failed to check the tide of corruption, inefficiency and mal-administration. In-fighting and internal bickering had distanced the Congress(I) party from the urban people.

The next municipal election in English Bazar was held on 27th May, 1990, after a lapse of more than 9 long years. During this period, the Left Front, which was running the Council, consolidated its position in English Bazar. The municipal area was extended, and the total number of wards increased from 17 to 24. The Left Front, in its campaign, propagated the positive role of the last Council in developing the town. With its strong organization, the C.P.I.(M) was able to convince a good proportion of citizens that intra-party conflict within the Congress could not help it to offer a stable urban government in English Bazar. On the other hand, factionalism within the Congress assumed significant proportions from the year 1981. During the period 1981 to 1990, there were frequent instances of gross indiscipline in the ranks of the Congress Party, and a large number of its leaders exhibited rank opportunism in deciding their position as between the rival factions inside the Party. However, the election outcome was in favour of the Left Front. Out of 24 seats, Congress bagged only 7 seats, the C.P.I.(M) won 12 seats, the C.P.I.-I, the R.S.P.-I, the F.B.-I, while 2 went to Independent candidates. ²⁸

The outcome of the 1990 municipal election indicated two new trends. First, the C.P.I.(M)-led Left Front consolidated

its position in the civic body. It captured 62 per cent of the total seats, whereas in 1981, it had obtained 52 per cent of the total seats. Whatever deficiencies there had been in the performance of the Left Front, it was perceived as having a mission, discipline and leadership. Second, the sharp erosion of Congress power was exhibited. The Congress which had continued its domination over the municipal politics for a long time, suffered a setback in municipal election of 1981, but never faced such a humiliating defeat as it had in the 1990 municipal election.

English Bazar Municipality is one of the oldest municipal institutions. Before independence, landlords had an effective influence over the municipality. After Independence, owing to the abolition of the traditional zamindari system, the old landlords dwindled in number and influence. The new dominant groups in the municipality were by and large persons engaged in professions, trade and business. Some Commissioners with considerable interest in landed estates continued to be influential; but the key to power clearly passed from their hands into those of the new professional politicians and party workers.

Old Malda

Old Malda has traditionally been a Congress stronghold. In the post-Independence era, Congress continued to enjoy dominance for two and a half decades. In 1977, when the Left Front came to power, the left parties, particularly the C.P.I.(M), began to consolidate its position in the sphere of urban politics. Old Malda

Municipality, from its inception in 1869, to 1976, had been superseded by the State government several times and the municipality contained nominated as well as elected members. The first municipal election under the Left Front regime in West Bengal was held in 1981. The result of the 1981 election proved highly important, signifying the rise of the B.J.P. and the fall of the Congress. Although, the Congress, as a party, boycotted the election, its candidates contested as Independents. Out of 9 seats, the C.P.I.(M) captured 4 seats, B.J.P.-3, and 2 went to Independent candidates who were known as Congress(I) workers in the locality. Thus, the B.J.P. formed the Council with the help of two Independents. Balai Chandra Basak of B.J.P. and Majid Mincha, an Independent candidate, became the Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively.

In the 1986 election, Congress suffered a setback due to several reasons. In the first place, the organisation of the Congress, both at the local and district levels, was very weak compared to that of its counterpart, the C.P.I.(M). Secondly, the Congress was faced with serious factional feuds within the district organization. There was an open conflict between the Congress member of the Legislative Assembly — Phanibhusan Roy of Old Malda constituency - and the most influential Union Minister, A.B.A.Ghani Khan Choudhury.²⁹ As a result, there was no consolidated effort on the part of the Congress in election campaign. Another factor which alienated the Congress from the voters was the introduction of Muslim Mahila Bills. Muslims, who had traditionally constituted the Congress 'vote bank', spurned the Congress in the municipal election. Even some Muslim women launched a procession against the

Muslim Mahila Bill just before the municipal election.³⁰ In consequence of all such factors, the Congress failed to form the Council. On the other hand, the C.P.I.(M) captured the civic body by winning 5 out of 9 seats, and 4 went to the Congress(I).³¹ Prem Sankar Seth of C.P.I.(M) was sworn in as the Chairman. The most striking feature of this election was the humiliating defeat of the B.J.P. The B.J.P. which captured the outgoing Council, contested in as many as 9 seats, but failed to win even a single seat. In other words, the B.J.P. was completely routed in the election.

The next municipal election in Old Malda, held in 1990, witnessed the impressive recovery of the Congress as it won 6 seats out of 9. The C.P.I.(M) bagged 3 seats.³² Although the B.J.P. contested in 8 seats, it could not win any. The return of the Congress did not herald the restoration of the old regime. It came back with a new brand of leadership in the form of more middle class leaders and professional political workers. Sri Tapan Das and Vaighista Trivedi, both belonging to Congress(I), were elected as Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively. Thus, the results of the three elections in Old Malda show that the urban electorate have frequently changed their preference and choice. In the 1981 election, the B.J.P. with the help of Independents, captured the Council, whereas in the 1986 election, the municipal voters favoured the C.P.I.(M) which formed the Council(B.) In the election of 1990, the urban electorate supported the Congress which regained power.

Table 6.1a

Municipal Election Results Held on May 16, 1981

District	Name of the Municipal Bodies	Total seats	Congress	CPI(M)	CPI	BJP	RSP	FB	IND supported by KF	IND supported by Congress	IND
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar (North) & Dakshin (South) Dinajpur	Balurghat	15	-	3	-	-	10	-	-	-	2
	Raiganj	16	9	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Malda	Englishbazar	17	-	5	2	-	1	1	-	-	8
	Old Malda	9	-	4	-	3	-	-	-	-	2

Source : Data collected from Local Party Offices of Congress and CPI(M).

Table 6.1b

Municipal Election Results held on June 15, 1986

District	Name of the Municipal Bodies	Total seats	Congress	CPI(M)	CPI	BJP	RSP	FB	IND support by LF	IND supported by Congress	IND
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar (North) & Dakshin (South) Dinajpur	Balurghat	15	2	3	-	-	10	-	-	-	-
	Raiganj	16	4	8	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Malda	Old Malda	9	4	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Sources : Udiran (in Bengali), (1986) June 16
Gourkatha (in Bengali) (1986), July 18.

Table 6.1c

Municipal Election Result held on ~~May 23~~ May, 1990

District	Name of the Municipal Bodies	Total Seats	Congress	CPI(M)	CPI	BJP	RSP	FB	IND supported by LF	IND supported by Congress	IND
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Malda	Englishbazar	24	7	12	1	-	1	1	-	-	2
	Old Malda	9	6	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source : A Handbook on Municipal Administration (1991), Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, Local Government and Urban Development Department (Calcutta) Govt. of West Bengal, p.21.

Table 6.1d

Municipal Election Result held on ~~June 8~~ June 8, 1991 at Raiganj

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	CPIML	11	12
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar (North) Dinajpur Raiganj & Dakshin (South) Dinajpur		22	12	7	-	-	1	-	-	2	-	-

Table 6.1e

Municipal Election Result held on May 30, 1993 at Balurghat

District	Name of the Municipal Body	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	IND supported by RSP
Dakshin (South) Dinajpur	Balurghat	23	6	1	-	-	15	-	1

Source : Paschim Dinajpur Barta (in Bengali) (1991), July 9.

In the pre-Independence period, the traditional landlords enjoyed unchallenged influence over the municipal institutions. After Independence, old landlords became less influentials. Although the key to power in the municipality is enjoyed by the people engaged in trade, business and different professions, the most notable feature of the Old Malda Municipality is that some persons who have landed estates have still continued to be influentials.

Section 2 : INTERACTION BETWEEN THE MUNICIPALITIES AND THE PRESSURE GROUPS IN THE SPHERE OF DECISION MAKING AND ADMINISTRATION

One important way in which individuals seek to influence decision-makers at the local level is through their membership of and sometimes active participation in organized groups.³³ People believe that group action is the best means by which they can influence the decision-making authority. For most people, political influence means joining an organization, be it a trade union or a tenants' association. These organized groups are often termed as interest groups or pressure groups which attempt to influence government decisions without seeking to become a part of the government. Such groups have long been a phenomenon of Indian urban politics. In these districts, too, several pressure groups operate in the urban politics in order to protect and promote their specific interests. These groups articulate their demands by approaching the incumbents with delegations and

representations. Broadly speaking, these pressure groups try to exert political influence through some major channels like the electorate, the political parties, the councillors and the administrative departments. But when these access channels fail to draw the attention of the municipal decision-makers to some crucial civic issues, gheraos, strikes and dharnas are launched to influence the civic authority. The role of the various pressure groups operating in the municipal arena in these districts may be discussed in the following way.

Employees' Associations

Employees' Associations play a significant role in the urban politics of these districts. These groups have shown that they have something to contribute to the decision-making process. Their support is regarded by the decision-makers as crucial if developmental proposals are to be adopted and implemented successfully. These groups are often consulted formally and informally on a wide range of local matters and have also a wide range of contacts inside the local authorities or a range of channels through which they are able to present their views. There are five such groups operating in the urban politics of these districts which have their affiliations, whether open or concealed, with political parties. Control of these groups is often in the hands of the political parties; that goes to the advantage of both in protecting and promoting their specific interests. In other words, almost all the Employees' Associations work as adjuncts

of the different political parties. For example, the West Bengal Municipal Workmen's Federation is a wing of the R.S.P., the All Bengal Municipal Workmen's Federation is linked with the C.P.I.(M), and the Paschim Banga Paura Karmachari Federation is guided by the Congress(I). There are two other associations working in Raiganj, namely, the Municipal Workmen's Union, dominated by some leaders of the Congress(I), and the Municipal Employees' Association led by C.P.I.(ML).

The Employees' Associations use different techniques, which range from persuasion to extreme militancy, to influence the decision-makers. These groups try to achieve by political action changes which they see as desirable, and to prevent changes regarded as undesirable. These Employees' Associations are linked with politicians and municipal officials by formal and informal points of contact. Formal contacts take place in Commissions and departmental advisory Committees. But much of the business between the representatives of Employees' Associations and the officials is done in an informal and unofficial way by letter, telephone and face-to-face discussion.

Protests continue to be a prominent motive for action of different employees' associations, although, diversity of tactics are used. There is a strong feeling among the Communists that the interest of the employees can best be safeguarded and protected if there is a Communist-dominated urban government. So, the employees must support it instead of creating problems for it.

Thus, while the Communist-dominated employees association in English Bazar had been working for workers' support to the urban government and therefore adhered to an anti-strike policy, the Communist-dominated employees' association had been in favour of strikes with a view to paralysing the Congress-led urban government in Raiganj and Old Malda. These groups resort to gherao, strike and bandhs whenever other channels fail to influence the decision-makers. In Old Malda Municipality, the then Chairman of the Municipal Council appointed 28 persons in the month of July, 1984, by violating the municipal rules and norms. This created a critical situation of stalemate as a result of which salaries of the employees were held up. Immediately, the Communist-dominated Old Malda Municipal Workmen's Union (later the title of the Union was renamed as All Bengal Municipal Workmen's Federation) launched protest against such illegal appointment and went on strike. The strike continued for a month, but the municipal decision-makers were reluctant to accept the legitimacy of the demand. The Employees' Association appealed to the District Magistrate against such illegal appointment and the District Magistrate, after a thorough investigation, stopped all such appointments by an order on 2.8.84.³⁴ However, the matter went to Court and the Hon'ble Justice Ajit Kr. Sengupta on 6.3.1992, under Civil Rule No.11959(W) declared that "I am of the view that the appointments given to the petitioners No.1 to 28 by the then Chairman of the Old Malda Municipality are illegal and in excess jurisdiction".³⁵ In the Raiganj Municipality, the Municipal Government retrenched 11 employees

in 1992, but under enormous pressure from the Communist-dominated Municipal Employees' Association the decision-makers of the ruling group ultimately responded and the 11 employees were reappointed within three months.³⁶

Divisions within similar pressure groups also occur due to personal rivalries among leaders. These personality clashes come not only from competing ambitions but also from simple dislike of the style or behaviour of certain leaders. One of the prominent leaders of Paschim Banga Paura Karmachari Federation in Raiganj, dominated by the Congress(I), confessed in an informal discussion that Paschim Banga Paura Karmachari Federation had been divided due to a personality clash between the two leaders, namely Sankar Chakraborty and Mohit Sengupta. In the same way, Swapan Dhar, Secretary of the Communist-dominated Raiganj Municipal Employees Association, alleged on 25th July, 1993, that C.I.T.U. (labour organization of C.P.I.(M) controlled Union of Raiganj Municipality was creating obstacles against the smooth functioning of their Association. Thus, it is observed that there are groups competing vigorously against each other within the same interest factor.

One important feature of the pressure groups is that sometimes cross-group alliance is formed and some strange partnership takes shape. One renowned leader of Raiganj Municipal Association confirmed that several times employees of other associations come to him for protecting and promoting their

interests. However, personalism is an important feature in pressure group politics. Most important from the stand point of pressure group politics are the attitudes that the individuals heading urban government and pressure groups have toward dealing with each other. At the same time, the personalities of the officials have similar impact on group access and influence. Their willingness to accept the opinions and concerns of the groups with which they deal and carry these opinions are often key elements in the exertion of successful influence by groups.

The abovementioned Employees' Associations sometimes act like anomic groups. They feel interested in creating conditions of anarchy whenever they lose faith in the use of methods like lobbying and persuasion.

For example, on the 1st January, 1992, the Joint Co-Ordination Committee of Raiganj Municipal Employees became aggressive and militant due to non-payment of salary. They locked the main gate of the institution and declared strike for an indefinite period. The reason behind the incident was the sudden resignation of the then Chairman, Poritosh Debnath, on 22nd December, 1991. Conflicts and tensions at the municipal decision-making level caused non-payment of salary of employees. Employees' strike paralysed the civic life in all respects. The strike was called off when the District Magistrate intervened and took some immediate steps for payment of salary to the employees. However, the Employees Associations mainly exist to fight for

better working conditions and higher wages for the employees; they accord only secondary importance to the civic problems.

Business Groups

The urban business community of these three districts include hotel owners, shopkeepers, tea plantation owners, small scale industry owners, contractors and manufacturers. Big industrialists, in the true sense of the term, are almost absent in the urban regions of these three districts. These businessmen rarely run for local office and seldom take part in active politics. As a logical corollary, these urban business persons actively sought to influence the policies and decisions of the urban government in the hope that the civic authority would adopt policies more sympathetic to the growth of the regional economy in general and business at the local level in particular.

The techniques that the organised business groups employ for the purpose of protecting and promoting their specific interests are : direct contact with the civic authority, Councillors, officials and lobbying that may cover payment of gratifications in cash or kind. This contact is ~~of~~ often facilitated by traditional ties of family, community or personal friendship. Sometimes, they rely less on political leaders and try to cultivate more intimate and effective contacts with the officials as those bureaucrats often guide the policies of the urban government.

In all the four municipalities, it is observed that business groups always endeavour to adjust with the urban government. The Chairmen of these four municipalities accepted the fact that business groups always extended their co-operation with the civic authority. It is an open secret that they offer donations in order to establish their influence over the civic bodies. They also extend necessary financial help to the political parties for fighting elections. In these three districts, business groups formed an organisation known as the District Chamber of Commerce respectively and it is the organisation through which businessmen try to influence the municipal decision-making body. In other words, the Chamber acts as the representative of the business houses.

Although business groups are mostly concerned with their economic interests, they also take part in rallies or processions for the interest of the citizens of the locality. For example, in July, 1983, whenever municipal tax was increased, the 'Raiganj Merchants' Association', jointly with the 'Rate Payers Committee', raised their voice and took a leading part in the movement to protest against such decision. The civic authority however, sympathetically viewed the claims and pledged to reassess the previous decision.³⁷ Business groups like the employees associations sometimes favour methods like strike or gheraos. For instance, when on 14th May, 1992, the municipal authority of Raiganj began to demolish some shops beside the road at Mohanbati area, the

Roadside Business Association closed the shops and marched to Raiganj Municipality where they submitted a memorandum to the Vice-Chairman of Raiganj Municipality against such action.³⁸

However, the dispute was resolved through discussion and mediation.

Citizens' Association

Citizens' Associations, although very few in number, operate in the urban politics of these three districts for the protection and promotion of the civic interests of the tax payer and citizens. These groups are loose, disorganised and fragmented organizations having nothing like stable political commitments. They lack effective lobbies like employees' associations and business groups to articulate their demands in influencing the decision-makers. In 1986, when the municipal authority in Balurghat, imposed property tax at a higher rate, the citizens' associations became active and demanded imposition of tax according to the capacity of the rate payers.³⁹ The decision-makers of the civic authority ultimately responded to the demands of the association. The same thing also happened in Raiganj. Here, citizens' association is very active and often complain with regard to choked drain, damage road, disruption in water supply, insufficient light, etc. In Old Malda, citizens' committee became militant and the people under the leadership of the Committee marched to the Old Malda Municipality as a protest against 28 appointments in the month of July, 1984.⁴⁰ However, citizens' organisations are not strong enough and unable to provide the institutional channels of access to the civic bodies.

Sectoral Groups

There are some sectoral groups, concerned with promoting specific and particular sectoral interests, close to their heart, and as such, are likely to be involved in a single issue or a narrow, and related, range of issues.⁴¹ The civic authority is acquainted with this kind of single interest group or groups that function and operate around single issues. For example, in Englishbazar, Gouriya Sangit Council placed a demand to the municipal authority for the purpose of giving a name to a road in the name of Bishnu Sevak Sastri⁴² a renowned singer. The civic authority promised to consider the demand.

Another example is the agitation launched by the Bar Association of Malda as a protest against the increase of property tax at a higher rate by the Central Valuation Board. It organized the citizens and formed a Seven-man committee on 10th February, 1991,⁴³ to assist any citizen who was willing to file a suit against the municipal authority for unjustified increase of house tax. The fundamental character of this group is that once the issue is decided one way or other, it goes out of operation.

Community Associations

Finally, in regard to community associations, we may say that their number is very negligible in these four municipal towns, in comparison to the other parts of the country. In this connection, we may refer to the 'Malda Zilla Harijan Samity' which started a hunger strike for an indefinite period from 28th June, 1993. Their demands included (a) approval of Harijan Sishu Vikash Vidyaloy by the Englishbazar Municipality; (b) rehabilitation of all Harijan people; (c) employment for Harijan youth; (d) retirement benefit of Harijan employees; (e) employment for one of the members of Harijan family,

where an employee dies in harness.⁴⁴ However, the municipal authority convinced the local citizens that it had already taken several steps for the upliftment of Harijan Community and the municipal authority had already pledged for the betterment of Harijans. The movement did not create much stir among the local people and the strike was called off.

Section 3 : LOCAL PRESS IN THE DECISION MAKING

In considering communications between the decision-making authority and the citizens, one automatically thinks of the local media as the most appropriate channel. In the context of the local politics, we have to give importance to the local press, for in most cases radio and television are essentially regionally oriented rather than locally so.

Local press, no doubt, acts as an articulator and aggregator of mass demands towards the local decision-makers and, on the other hand, it acts as a principal source of information about the activities of the local authority itself. As a source of local information, the local press has emerged as 'of prime importance'. Without local weekly or fortnightly, most people would not know about the activities of their local authority than they do at present.

Several newspapers are published from the municipal towns of these districts. There is no daily, most of them are weekly or fortnightly. Local papers of Balurghat like Anusandhani Chokhe, Udiran, Balurghat Barta, Balurghat Sambad, Paschim Dinajpur Saptahik Sambad, reflect the civic demands, problems and issues, as well as the municipal activities in the locality. Newspapers like Anusandhani Chokhe, Udiran, Balurghat Sambad, are edited and published by the left-minded people, whereas Balurghat Barta is edited by a Congress leader. However, all these papers are staunch supporters of "good urban government".

Raiganj has some regular weekly and fortnightly papers, like Uttar Banga Barta, Prachar, Kulik, Uttarbanger Pragati, Tufan Paschim Dinajpur Barta, etc. Weekly papers, like Prachar and Uttarbanga Barta make much effort to dig below the surface of municipal affairs. Tapan Choudhury, Editor of Uttarbanga Barta, is personally very much involved in the local civic matters. He is an active member of the local civic associations and participated in many movements to press for the civic demands. It is said that Kulik and Uttarbanger Pragati are edited by the persons who believe in leftist ideology. On the other hand, Paschim Dinajpur Barta is published by a radical educated person.

However, there are some pieces of evidence which show the willingness of local editors, reporters and newspaper owners to present the views of the local authority.

In Malda, particularly in Englishbazar, several weeklies are published, namely - Maldar Samachar, Gourkantha, Gourdut, Maldaar Khabar, Gourbhumi, Goubarta etc. Some of these papers are firmly committed to the non-partisan character, and courageously criticise the civic authority. Some carry little news regarding civic matters, and thus do not have much political weight, and even their coverage of civic election is usually perfunctory. Sociologists and political scientists have given considerable attention to the role of the local (particularly) weekly press and local politics. However, all the abovementioned newspapers work as channels of communication from the authority to the local

residents. Without these weekly or fortnightly newspapers, most people would know even less about the activities of their local authorities than they do at present.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

From the above discussion, certain conclusions can be drawn. In the first place, provision of franchise on the basis of the principle of universal adult suffrage had led to the slow but steadily increasing political consciousness of the voters. Secondly, individuals or group of individuals showed a tendency to split a party either for ideological reasons or for serving personal ends. Thirdly, the people by and large favour unity among the Left Front and also within the Congress Party. This was well-demonstrated in the Raiganj Municipal election of 1991 and the Balurghat municipal election of 1993. Fourthly, some parties fight in the municipal election just for their survival. Their influence upon the municipal decision-making body is not very effective. Finally intra-party conflict is much more acute within the Congress Party than in others.

With regard to pattern of municipal politics, Raiganj, Balurghat, Englishbazar and Old Malda present some important

differences. Raiganj shows an instability following the Congress split. Here, internal divisions within the Congress precluded ideological cohesion and political stability both within the party and the municipality. On the other hand, the strong tradition of social work and political participation fostered by the freedom fighters provides a stimulus to public spirit. The socio-economic and political life of Balurghat is based on indigenous, cohesive and public-spirited leadership. This public spirit presents a stable municipal government.

The politics of Englishbazar Municipality had been controlled by the Congress Party, but in fact by a number of warring factions, after Independence. After a prolonged political battle, the Left Front was able to establish its influence from 1981. In Englishbazar, a few prominent merchants and manufacturers dominate the economic life of the town and various groups jostle together in competition for social and political influence.

Culturally and politically, Old Malda has a low profile and is characterised by an utter diffusiveness and disorganisation of its social and political life. The interference of district and

state level leaders into the local and municipal politics of Old Malda accounts for the inability of the local political process to work itself out. Both Councillors and officials sought and received support at district and state levels, and the municipal government was sometimes used for purposes mostly other than of urban development.

The analysis of the role of pressure groups in the urban decision making process shows that the authorities are either unaware of their problems, or else are unwilling to do anything about them. Authorities, on the other hand, however, sympathetically they may view the claims of these groups, often consider themselves unable to do much about them, either because they lack the resources to do much or because they feel it is beyond their responsibility. Some groups, practically very few, are regarded as helpful and necessary, whereas other groups are viewed as 'unhelpful' and 'damaging' because they have little to offer to the civic body. In reality group activity is characterised by both failure and success at some point of time or other. It is not always easy to say whether or not urban government has acted in consequence of the pressure exerted by a particular group.

Most observers content that pressure groups operating at the urban municipal level are now less powerful because the strength of the political structures serves as a better counter weight to pressure groups than in the past.

Notes and References

- 1 Quoted by Ashraf, A.A. (1977). Government and Politics of Big Cities - An Indian Case Study (Delhi, Concept Publishing House), p.VI.
- 2 Goldsmith, Michael (1980). Politics, Planning and the City (London, Hutchinson), p.68.
- 3 For example, in 1977, on 22nd March, the then Government of West Bengal declared an Ordinance by which article 47(c) of the Bengal Municipal Act, was amended and as a result of which 39 municipalities were superseded (Ganasakti, June 8, 1986).
- 4 Anyadin (in Bengali), June 10, 1986.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Udiran (in Bengali), June 16, 1986.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Paschim Dinajpur Barta (in Bengali), May 31, 1991.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Paschim Dinajpur Barta (in Bengali), July 9, 1991.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Uttarbanga Barta (in Bengali), February 2, 1992.
- 15 Smaranika (in Bengali) (1985), Balurghat Municipality, p.51.
- 16 Anusandhani Choke (in Bengali), April 30, 1993.

- 17 Balurghat Municipality came into existence in 1951 with nine nominated Commissioners to run the municipality. Congress dominated the Board from 1.3.54 to 23.4.58 from 15.6.60 to 15.10.62 and from 7.12.64 to 15.8.69 (Smaranika (in Bengali) op.cit., pp.6-9).
- 18 Ibid., p.51.
- 19 Ibid., p.41.
- 20 Ibid., p.52.
- 21 Ibid., p.4.
- 22 Anyadin (in Bengali), June 10, 1986.
- 23 Balurghat Barta (in Bengali), June 18, 1986.
- 24 Anyadin (in Bengali), April 30, 1986.
- 25 Anusandhani Chokhe (in Bengali), April 15, 1993.
- 26 Balurghat Sambad (in Bengali), May 27, 1973.
- 27 In the election of Balurghat Municipality, held on May 30, 1993, total number of valid vote caste was 33,098, out of which R.S.P. secured 12,655 (38%), Congress 10,834(33%), C.P.I.(M) 6,975 (20%) and B.J.P. 2,501(8%) (Anusandhani Chokhe in Bengali June 3, 1973).
- 28 A Handbook on Municipal Administration (1991), Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies (Calcutta, Government of West Bengal).
- 29 Gourkantha (in Bengali), July 8, 1986.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 A Handbook on Municipal Administration, op.cit., p.21.

- 33 Goldsmith, Michael (1980). Politics, Planning and the City
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- 34 Gourkantha (in Bengali), August 14, 1984.
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- 36 Anusandhani Chokhe (in Bengali), January 1, 1992.
- 37 Pamphlet (in Bengali) 10.7.1983, Published jointly by
Raiganj Merchants' Association and Raiganj Citizens'
Association.
- 38 Uttarbanqa Barta (in Bengali), July 19, 1992.
- 39 Balurghat Barta (in Bengali), June 4, 1986.
- 40 Gourkantha (in Bengali), August 14, 1984.
- 41 See for example, Cox, W.P. and Morgan, D. (1974), City Politics
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- 42 Gourkantha (in Bengali), December 11, 1990.
- 43 Gourkantha (in Bengali), February 18, 1992.
- 44 Leaflet (in Bengali) Published by the English Bazar
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