

# State –People Interaction in West Bengal: A Comparative Study of Selected Urban Centres

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## Abstract

This research paper explores the attitudes and perceptions of urban dwellers towards their local municipal governance to seek possible answers to the research question: ‘how much do political attitudes developed at the local level impact upon the system of urban governance?’ I use the context of my empirical research of eight selected towns, namely, Asansol, Balurghat, Bolpur, Burdwan, Kalimpong, Kalna, Siliguri and Tarakeswar of West Bengal. The study was conducted during 2017-2018. I found that a strong relationship does not exist between citizens’ attitudes towards their local government and the public policies of these administrations. There are gaps in satisfaction in political efficiency, accountability and satisfaction as evident from the study. I conclude that the levels in the quality and quantity of urban services can be raised only by increasing the levels of interaction between city dwellers and their elected representatives. This paper is based on the empirical survey done with the help of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data used in this paper are collected from both the primary and the secondary sources.

**Key Words:** perception, attitude, political efficiency, accountability, satisfaction.

## Introduction

Studies of urban governance in India have conventionally paying attention on fiscal management (for example Jha and Swaroop, 1998; Pillai et al., 1997; Jha, Mohanty and Chatterjee, 1995; Easterly and Hebbel, 1993;), and only recently have the studies of civil society-government interactions become important as an area of enquiry in the urban context. Local political cultures of residents have remained less explored by urban geographers. Such questions as ‘what types of political attitudes are developed at the ground level?’ and ‘what impact do these attitudes have on the system?’ have hardly ever received close attention of urban experts. The present study has chosen to pursue these questions to examine the relationship between urban dweller’s attitude toward their local governments and the public policies of these administrations. I have also tried to make a distinction between attitudes and perceptions in this study. Perception is commonly thought to be synonymous to attitude; my argument is that attitudes take time to develop as evident from the responses reported here in this work. The approach of my study is rooted in behavioural customs in human geographical enquiries.

The concern for understanding the behavioural aspects of urban governance has come to the forefront of urban geographical research only in recent years, and may have to do with the increasing significance on perception research by international agencies. As the approach to governance becomes more ‘bottom up’ and more people-oriented, we tend to look into how the citizens respond to governance and vice-versa. Thus, from learning how the government works, who governs and community power studies, to an enquiry into various programmes of local urban governments — the entire range of studies, are leading to the current concern about the human implications of local government actions. In fact, such studies have led the way to the rethinking and reconsiderations of the more sweeping, systematic effects of policy. One such effect, which is considered to be of major importance, is the impact of local policy on the political attitudes and behaviour of the ordinary citizens. It is in this context that the study of local political culture has become so important, evident in the spate of studies and books (for example Rodgers, 1977; Hutcheson and Shevin, 1976; Rossie *et al.*, 1974).

### Research Methodology

For the purpose of my study, I have selected eight towns of West Bengal, all characterized by the presence of urban governments of various kinds, mainly municipalities and municipal corporations. My selection of these towns is entirely subjective and I do not dispute that instead of these, another group of towns of West Bengal could have been taken up for studying state-people interaction at the local level. Also I accept that there may be other views on the modes of looking into local political in the urban context from a perception perspective. The survey was questionnaire-based, and was done over a period of one year in 2017-2018 during which time I completed another research project on these towns. The voter list of each urban centre was taken as the database and a stratified sampling technique was adopted. This paper is based on the empirical survey done with the help of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data used in this paper are collected from both the primary and the secondary sources.

### The Urban Centres

The urban governments represent a wide variety of locations within the state of West Bengal and represent a range of size from large to the small, with Asansol being largest (population 5,63,917) to Tarakeswar (30,947) being the smallest (as per 2011 census). The following table gives a brief overview of population and occupational characteristics of these towns.

**Table 1: Overview of selected Towns of West Bengal**

Name	Type of municipal body	Date of establishment of municipal body	Population In 2011	Population density (per sq. km.)	1 <sup>st</sup> Ranking occupation	2 <sup>nd</sup> Ranking occupation
Kalimpong	Municipality	1945	49,403	210	Other Services	Trade and commerce
Siliguri	Municipal Corporation	1950	7,05,579	12,165	Trade and commerce	Other Services
Balurghat	Municipality	1951	1,53,279	14,245	Other Services	Trade and commerce
Bolpur	Municipality	1955	80,210	610	Other Services	Trade and commerce
Burdwan	Municipality	1865	3,14,265	1,099	Other Services	Trade and commerce

Asansol	Municipal Corporation	1885	5,63,917	3,500	Trade and commerce	Other Services
Kalna	Municipality	1869	56,722	12,891	Other Services	Trade and commerce
Tarakeswar	Municipality	1975	30,947	1,500	Trade and commerce	Other Services

Source: Census of India, 2011.

Singh and Singh (1979) had noted that although there is no identified limit of population for small towns of India, all urban areas having fewer than 50,000 populations may be recognized as 'small' towns. From this perspective only three of our chosen towns can be categorized as small. Bolpur is a marginal case from the point of view of size whereas four others are distinctly above the United States Aid for International Development (USAID) threshold demarcated in 1975 in India. Though the Indian census defines the urban centres with above 1,00,000 population 'cities', they continue to remain similar to their smaller counterparts and lack a significant urban culture (Dasgupta, 1988; 1978). Broadly speaking the selected urban centres may be described as 'medium-sized towns', or even 'mofussil towns' of West Bengal.

As evident from the table, the towns studied here may be scattered over the state of West Bengal, but have considerable uniformity with regard to their occupational structures, trade and commerce and other services being the two major functions in all of them. They, however, have diverse histories of growth and urban governance. Their local traits and importance as nodes of activities also vary widely.

Kalimpong town, located in Darjeeling district, is a well-known hill-station and resort. Siliguri is significant for its gateway location and dominant role in the regional economy of North Bengal. It is also the focus of all transport routes in North Bengal. Balurghat in South Dinajpur district is a border town and is ailed by problems associated with such a location. Bolpur is located in the *Rarh* plains on the western branch of Bhagirathi-Hooghly, at the fringe of Chhotanagpur plateau. Burdwan is an old town amidst a large and prosperous agricultural hinterland with a strong commercial belt. Asansol is located at the heart of the Raniganj coal belt and is the largest town of the region with all the coal mining and industry related activities as well as the important railway junctions. Most of these towns have grown significantly in the last few decades after independence: Siliguri and Balurghat especially have received a large number of immigrants from Bangladesh, and have been the destination of rural to urban migration from surrounding districts and states as well. Kalna is quite contrary to others in that it is an old and stagnant town in terms of population growth. Located along the navigable waterway of the river Hooghly, Kalna was once a significant commercial center for the river-borne trade. With the introduction of railway the focus of urban settlements shifted away and Kalna, that had acquired municipality early in its history, has now become a moribund town. Tarakeswar was a small rural market center but has now turned into a pilgrimage town with a large floating population and temple related flourishing business activities.

### Attitudes and Perceptions

Aspects of human perception have been studied in many disciplines within the fold of social science at an increasing rate in recent years. Geographers have emphasized human understanding and appraisal of the everyday world of humans, thereby making perception studies an integral part of human geographical inquiry (Gregory, 1987; Whyte, 1977). In urban contexts, where the populations are essentially heterogeneous such

inquiries may yield good insights onto hitherto unexplored areas (for example of previous work in India see Lahiri-Dutt, 1999; Lahiri-dutt, 1998; Mamgain and Karakwal, 1986; Saha, 1982; Nag, 1980; Desai, 1979; 1980; or see Lynch, 1976; Appeyard, 1970 for others).

In the context of social science, the term ‘attitude’ is interchangeably used with ‘perception’ (Mitchell, 1989). Both are viewed as to have emerged due to the cognitive psychology (Malin, 1994). Perception is a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available information. It is a ‘pre-intellectual activity’ (Relph, 1989), which implies an unqualified first response. In contrast, attitudes take time to develop and is qualified by an individual’s cultural attributes. Schiff (1971) had pointed to the wide range of definitions of the term and the problem of comparability and verification of findings from surveys. She defined attitude as an ‘... organized set of fillings and beliefs which will influence an individuals behaviour.’ Saarinen did not initially identify and difference between attitude and perception studies (Saarinen, 1976). In a latter report (Saarinen, 1984), have expressed concern that if geographers treat perceptions, attitudes and behaviour studies as end in themselves rather than as a means to understanding social-spatial processes, we will not make a substantial contribution to intellectual inquiry. One important objective of research based on both attitudes and perceptions is to provide a systematic and scientific understanding of the view from inside out, in order to supplement the more traditional and external scientific approach. The view from the inside may be that of an individual, a local community or even the whole urban/rural population. The scale is less important than the relationship between those inside and those traditionally on the outside. The inside view is characterized by familiarity and long experience, as personalize and subjective. Attitude research gives our work a two-way relevance: contextually that is relating attitudes to the urban management, and practical application of behavioural approach in urban governance. As Burton (1971) had observed: ‘the social role of attitude and perception studies is to provide an input into the planning process to serve as a vehicle for public in decision-making’. Burgess’s 1978 work on Hull examining the impressions people formed about places, and assessing whether these impressions were formed in any kind of systematic manner provided us with an exemplary work to follow in cause of our studies.

### Survey Results and Analysis

The major emphasis in this study is on the local political culture. Such questions as ‘what kinds of political attitudes are develop at the local level?’ and ‘what impact do their attitudes have on the system?’ have now begun to arise in India. Our study examines the relationship between citizen’s attitude towards their local government and the public policies of the administrators. The questionnaire included three general political attitudes – efficiency, accountability and satisfaction. The questions in the survey were used to determine the existence of those attitudes.

**Political efficiency** is measured by the responses answered to these following two questions: How much do you think the people who count in the local government in your Town are concerned about the same problems you are concerned about: and what do you think is the best way that people like you can make themselves heard by city government? The results are discussed in the following table:

**Table 2: Feeling of Respondents**

Name of Town	Very much	Some	A little	Rarely at all	Can't say
Asansol	04	22	26	24	24
Balurghat	16	20	36	20	08
Bolpur	12	32	28	18	10
Burdwan	06	20	28	34	12
Kalimpong	04	50	22	10	24
Kalna	14	44	22	12	08
Siliguri	18	53	08	01	20
Tarakeswar	28	48	10	04	10

This table gives feelings of the respondents on the political efficiency of the urban government of the town in which they live. In the Tarakeswar municipality, about 28% of the respondents feel that their representatives are concerned very much with the same problem they have. Between this figure and the next is a big gap; the second high score has been expressed by the residents of Siliguri (18%) and Kalna (14%). On an average, this 'very much' category is expressed only by 13% respondents of all towns are taken together. In Tarakeswar in general, the respondents expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the way their town is governed. A high percentage of population in Siliguri (53%), Kalimpong (50%), Tarakeswar (48%), and Kalna (44%) state that their problems are moderately concerned by the state representatives. On an average 36% of the respondents answer 'some' for expressing their feelings about political efficiency in urban West Bengal. 'A little' satisfaction is expressed by 23% of the respondents on an average. Most of the people in Burdwan municipality (34%) are dissatisfied about the political efficiency of their representatives. It is notable that about 14% people in West Bengal are ignorant about the political efficiency of their municipal representatives.

**Table 3: Ways of Expressing Problems**

Name of town	Application to the councilor/ commissioner	Application to the Mayor/chair man	Movement	Meeting with councilor	No way	Indifferent
Asansol	26	32	32	06	04	--
Balurghat	10	08	50	12	06	14
Bolpur	74	08	16	--	02	--
Burdwan	64	22	10	--	04	--
Kalimpong	24	18	04	36	16	02
Kalna	58	--	30	10	02	--
Siliguri	74	--	20	--	04	02
Tarakeswar	30	14	18	36	--	02

Table 3 shows the ways of expressing different problems of the respondents to their state representatives. This question is asked for measuring the State-people interactions in urban West Bengal. From such level of political efficiency we find out whether the respondents express their problems in systematic or in haphazard way. On an average a significant (58%) portion of respondents opined their systematic manner, which they like to do for their local issues. Only in Balurghat municipality about 50% of the voters have violent motive in this regard. This is mainly due to their immigration problem from the time of

establishment of the municipality. Between this figure and the next is a big gap; the second high score has been expressed by the residents of Asansol (32%) and Kalna (30%). In these municipalities, we found a little relationship between citizens' attitudes toward their local government and the public policies of these administrations. As a whole 23% respondents express their violent motive in this regard.

On an average about 7% people are remain indifferent and they have no way for expressing their problems.

**Political accountability** is measured by responses to the following question: how honest do you think local government officials are in this town?

**Table 4: Honesty of Elected Representatives**

Name of town/city	Honest	Moderately Honest	Dishonest	Don't know	Both honest and dishonest	Ruling party support their dishonest
Asansol	26	24	04	40	04	02
Balurghat	01	30	39	04	26	--
Bolpur	24	28	04	44	--	--
Burdwan	24	38	02	36	--	--
Kalimpong	30	06	14	50	--	--
Kalna	42	06	22	30	--	--
Siliguri	61	06	04	39	--	--
Tarakeswar	50	16	08	26	--	--

A positive response to the question indicate a high level of trust of the citizens on their local government officials; an unfavourable response to either or both questions indicates political cynicism, as opposed to trust. Results of Table 4 shows that a majority of surveyed respondents of Siliguri (61%), Tarakeswar (50%), and Kalna (42%) municipality have no complaints about the honesty of their representatives of the local government. In this regard the exceptional case is found in Balurghat municipality. Here only 1% respondent feels that the local government officials are perfectly honest. Most of them (69%) suspect about the honesty of the local government representatives. On an average about 34% of the respondents in a way confirmed the dishonesty by keeping silent on that particularly sensitive issue.

Finally, **overall satisfaction** with urban governance performance is measured against the following two questions: (a) How would you rate the way your town is run? And (b) do you feel your interests are adequately protected by the current group of representatives in your town? The surveyed results are analyzed in the following tables.

**Table 5: Attitude About the Way the Town is running**

Name of town	Excellent	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
Asansol	--	02	34	46	18	--
Balurghat	--	44	10	18	04	24
Bolpur	--	08	18	40	02	32
Burdwan	02	26	14	22	34	02
Kalimpong	--	36	06	20	04	34
Kalna	10	34	10	12	10	24
Siliguri	04	54	36	02	04	--
Tarakeswar	10	--	34	34	18	02

This question intended to find out the citizens' attitudes towards urban governance. The results are appearing in Table 5. Half (54%) of the citizens surveyed in Siliguri municipality expressed their positive attitude towards the way the town is running presently. The attitude of citizens of the Balurghat municipality is different from others. They opine that the town is running perfectly except their individual surroundings. Most of them are personally dissatisfied. Generally it is realized that the better off respondents felt that the town is being run properly, but for the poor people the answer varied from 'fair' to 'very poor'.

**Table 7: Local Government's Role in Protecting People's Interests**

Name of Towns	Very much	Some what	Not at all
Asansol	10	78	12
Balurghat	20	60	20
Bolpur	02	94	04
Burdwan	08	90	02
Kalimpong	12	72	16
Kalna	12	68	20
Siliguri	30	64	06
Tarakeswar	40	50	10

We now tried to find out the respondents' perception of their local government's role in protecting their interest. The majority of respondents (on an average 72%) feel that local government has more or less fail to protect their interests. The strong supporters of urban governance in Tarakeswar (40%) and Siliguri (30%) municipality said that their interests are totally protected by the local governments' representatives. A substantial segment (average 11%) argues that the representatives are totally failed to protect their interests.

### Concluding Remarks

From this questionnaire-based survey, I attempted to examine the political efficiency of urban representatives. Overall, the subjective feelings of individuals about their urban governance were not entirely satisfactory. Some respondents saw the municipal bodies as stagnant and inefficient. Others expressed satisfaction in the ways their urban government was run. It is possible that these unfavourable attitudes betray a political cynicism rather than political accountability of citizens on their local urban governments.

The overall performance of local government and the public policies of these administrations in providing basic urban services have not been entirely satisfactory as evident from the responses collected

here. The general observation is that the municipal services, both in quality and quantity, are rather poor and the city dwellers are aware about these lacunae. Many administrative bodies in our sample study were, unfortunately, less than aware about their unsatisfactory performance with regard to the expectations of their citizens. The efficiency and effective functioning of urban government institutions and the standard of services and amenities provided by them may be raised only by increasing interaction between citizens and their new governance. Citizens' perception, if reflect lack of accountability and satisfaction, must then be taken into consideration in formulating different public policies that are more effective and in tune with the citizens' expectations.

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