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25 years on, Calcutta might remain just another city...

A Staff Reporter



(From left) Julie Mehta, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Supriya Chaudhuri, Pradeep Kakkar, Sukanta Chaudhuri and Anjita Roychaudhuri at the panel discussion at Asutosh Birth Centenary Auditorium. Picture by Anindya Shankar Ray

Will Calcutta still remain the culture cradle of India in 2040? What is the future of the City of Joy? A second London or one "mired by its *kopa*"?

To mark 25 years of NGO People United For Better Living In Calcutta (PUBLIC), its founders Pradeep and Bonani Kakkar decided to look forward 25 years from now.

As a first step, nine people, aged between 30 and 60, used the Delphi method to reach a conclusion - by 2040, the city will see enormous changes in infrastructure but populism rather than visionary leadership may bring about the development. With its youth continuing to leave the city, Calcutta might just lose its culture-capital tag and be just another city. Or it might submerge, if climate gurus are to be believed...

This was followed up with two panel discussions conducted by PUBLIC and the Indian Museum in association with **The Telegraph** at the Asutosh Birth Centenary Auditorium on June 25.

The first discussion on "What makes a city great" had among the panellists some original participants of the Delphi method - Pradeep Kakkar, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Anjita Roychaudhuri, Julie Mehta - and guests Sukanta and Supriya Chaudhuri.

The Kakkars set the ball rolling by explaining how PUBLIC was formed out of anger and frustration in the '90s. "Now, we want to see where the city is going and hope to stimulate thinking. The survey (Delphi method) is a result of qualitative thinking by people who don't even know each other," said Pradeep.

Academician Supriya Chaudhuri began the discussion by quoting a French anthropologist who has said Asian cities are Europe's future rather than their past. She was concerned with the constant flow of "traffic" - people, things - into Calcutta and the imbalance it might cause

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in future. She said the city would host a much larger population and that would determine its character.



"We should think of the city as a throbbing chaotic mess as it already is. The constant push and pull associated with Calcutta will continue to exert pressure," she said, referring to migration. "But Calcutta still is far more liveable than many other cities."

For academician Sukanta Chaudhuri, Calcutta was never a good place to live in, right from the 19th century. So the graph of Calcutta has not really gone down. According to him, one must begin by treating Calcutta as a "normal city". "The city now looks visually better. Money is flowing into the city some way or the other.... The evidence lies in the sprouting up of shopping malls, increased stocking of consumer goods in the suburbia, surge of gold and jewellery shops and the spread of down-market real estate that plays havoc with our environment.

"Cultural activities are sponsored.... But what is worrying is the economic division among people. The *para* culture and the grass-roots cultural activities are more politicised." The future may see us routing our growth and visionary projects through the populist route to gain acceptance, he said.

Journalist Anjita Roychaudhury quoted Kipling to bring out how Calcutta is a city of contrast. She said Calcutta was destined for greatness but "is mired by her *kopa*". Her Calcutta is "a bloated remnant of a bygone era that gloats on past glories... an inheritance of loss and full of stubborn argumentative Bengalis". "So any comparison to London or Paris is unfair," she said.

Author and scholar Julie Mehta, who returned to the city after 30 years, still sees hope. She said she looked at Calcutta like one would look at a lover - with love as well as embarrassment. "We don't legislate enough in the city. But the rise of entrepreneurship is encouraging... we need to have more civic amenities. But no city is stagnant and neither will Calcutta ever be."

Historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee wrapped up the discussion by saying he still saw the glass half empty. "I have seen the city been wrested away from citizens by politicians of different hues... where the poor is a vote bank. We make postures and gestures so that the poor will vote for us. This politics of populism is spelling the death knell of Calcutta. Nothing has changed in the past and nothing will change in future."

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