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Diwali in the global city

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Street urchins sell gift items made of sequined papier maché and business centres come alive with strings of coloured acrylic triangles. It's an apt moment to wonder about the quirkiness of globalisation

Last week Mumbai played host to the Urban Age Conference, one of a worldwide series initiated by the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society in their ongoing endeavour to shape the thinking and practice of urban leaders and sustainable urban development. For three days 350 delegates including academics, urban thinkers and planners, activists, architects, business heads and city leaders from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bogota, Singapore,



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Johannesburg, Washington DC, London and Sao Paulo met at a downtown five-star hotel to discuss the future of cities and the challenges posed by climate change and urban inequality and the possibilities of democratic engagement. The impact of climate change on Indian cities — the threat of rising sea water, flooding and the erosion of snow in the Himalayas — was a key issue for debate with speakers urging the need to reduce carbon emissions and pointing to strategies of sustainable development such as the use of gas for public transport. The future of Mumbai was another significant subject of discussion. Topics covered included the problem of housing for the poor, redevelopment of the Dharavi slum and plans to improve urban infrastructure including the building of flyovers and overhauling the drainage system.

The subject of Mumbai's administration — and the popular view among a section of its citizens that the city should be removed from state control and placed under an independent elected administrator — was also mooted. Another subject that was avidly debated was the growing incursion of private interests on public space.

All these discussions took place behind closed doors with entry by invitation only. But a day later the Mumbai-based Research Collective, Pukar, organised a public talk by visiting academic, Saskia Sassen. One of the world's leading urban theorists, best known for her 1991 book, *The Global City*, Sassen's talk focused on emerging global patterns. Significant among the various points she raised in her lecture and in interviews were the following: one, that

contrary to common fears, global cities would not necessarily become mirror images of each other though the new glamour zones in cities — sites with the capability to handle global operations of firms and markets including hotels, office districts and so on — would tend to be similar. The second point was that far from doing away with the informal economy, the proliferating glamour zones would require a substantial amount of cheap, adaptable labour to service its growing needs. The reliance of the booming market in designer home accessories on craftsmen is one such instance.

The present moment is a particularly apt one to reflect on these peculiarities. In the decades to come Mumbai will be among the topmost financial centres in the world. And while its creaking infrastructure is a common cause for complaint, it has not come in the way of its emerging glamour zones with their conspicuous new luxury hotels, posh business centres and flyovers. At the same time, as anyone living and moving about in the city would testify, however glamorous and upscale the city may have become, it is hard to escape the markedly indigenous and local phenomenon of festivals.

The season begins in Mumbai in September with the Mount Mary Feast, a week-long festival at a Portuguese church in the western suburb of Bandra drawing busloads of visitors from all over the city. Next is the Ganpati festival, an event marked by noisy processions and public immersions. Navratri, Dussehra, Id, Diwali and Christmas follow in quick succession, each marked by public gatherings, colourful pandals, roadside kiosks and music. It is hard to imagine any city in the world which would be called upon to alter its traffic rules and lifestyle to accommodate such celebratory outbursts on a regular basis.

Each festival is supported by a mini industry. The knick knacks sold on the road during the Mount Mary feast (luminous crucifixes, wooden figurines), the decorated Ganpati pandals and the embroidery on Christmas dresses are the handiwork of anonymous, toiling artisans. How their business may have expanded can be guessed from the finery on show this Diwali. Mumbai's street urchins are selling gift items made of sequined papier mache. And jewellery shops are strung out with coloured lights and elaborate floral displays. Strands of lights hang from trees, form canopies or cascade down the fronts of multi-storied buildings. A business centre has strings of coloured acrylic triangles floating down its atrium, another is lit up entirely by a cold blue light. Lanterns in every shape, size and colour are on sale at street corners and every bush and dark doorway appears to be a-glitter. Globalisation can be a quirky business.

Mumbai-based Shah is author of 'Hope, Hypocrisy and Television in Urban India'