There have been calls to broaden urban theory to incorporate learnings from the Southern or ordinary cities (periphery). These calls are often placed as a counter to the hegemony of the Northern cities (metropolis), which have long been the sites for producing theory. If the metropolis is a concept to describe clustering of power and knowledge, then geographical located-ness of this metropolis in the North is theoretically stifling. Therefore, we need to investigate the formation of metropolises within various cities, to study them in their own right, rather than merely pitching them against the northern cities or theory. Building on the qualitative study of street food sellers, users, and producers, I illustrate contrasting narratives from Colombo and Delhi. I take the lunch-packet sector in Colombo to develop narratives of the city and read it alongside those of the momos (dumpling) sector in Delhi. Through these everyday urban narratives, I build a set of urban imageries, distinct in both cities, and compare them with their planning histories via master plans. Using this juxtaposition, I argue that for the city to be rendered outside of the North’s knowledge hegemony (i.e., for Southern theory), we need to have an interiorized ontological probing. Key Words: knowledge hegemony, South Asia, Southern theory, street food, urban informality.

Kasun,1 who works in a Bentota restaurant close to his home, told me that he finds Colombo “very busy.” He has a value attached to Colombo, where his sister can find a job, away from the vice-ridden (as he claims) tourism industry that thrives in Bentota, or to buy pants, which he has a better choice of in Colombo. For him, the big city of Colombo is good to visit sometimes but not to live in, comparing it to the relaxed lifestyle he enjoys in Bentota.

Badal, a young adult who migrated from West Bengal, now sells momos in Chirag Dilli. He explained to me how people in Delhi are welcoming and it is very easy to find jobs, compared to his native village. In describing his entrepreneurial journey, he often uses the city of Delhi and the settlement of Chirag Dilli interchangeably. For him, Chirag Dilli is where his friends live (pointing to the migration links), where he does his “time pass” (leisure), and where his career is evolving. His positive and negative connotations about Delhi were articulated in comparison to life in Chirag Dilli.

Aside from these everyday city conceptualizations, Colombo, in its planning documents, is imagined as a megapolis to be developed for economic growth. It is envisaged as a keystone in Sri Lanka’s march toward being developed and securing the status of a high-income country (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development 2016). It defines Aluthgama Town (on the periphery of which lies Bentota Village) as a regional tourism center linked to the city of Colombo, which will be the national economic hub. Furthermore, the planning documents of Delhi indicate that it should be a world-class city and intends to valorize on the heritage value of places like Chirag Dilli (Ministry of Urban Development 2007). It renders Chirag Dilli by reducing it to the heritage buildings it entails and the potential benefits of reviving them.

The spatial plans in both Colombo and Delhi are drawn on the lines of scientific planning methods. The conceptualizations of the city by citizens like Kasun and Badal are mere stories. This juxtaposition of casual talks with nonexperts and documents prepared by professionally trained planners is done here to highlight a certain knowledge hegemony that rakes South Asian cities. How the city is conceptualized and how nonexperts are marginalized is a story of domination and colonial legacy in the cities of Colombo, Delhi, and arguably other former colonies (Mignolo 2005). It is a story of rendering arbitrary whims of one class as scientific to marginalize other forms of knowledge or knowing (Visvanathan 2002). Therefore, the article asks the question of how
Kasun’s Colombo as a place to buy pants is different from the planner’s view of it being a South Asian economic center or how Badal’s Chirag Dilli, as a hub of household industries, is different from the planner’s view of it being a heritage complex of a world-class Delhi. Furthermore, as to why this difference matters and what it can contribute to southern theory, I take the urban imageries of city dwellers (Debarbieux 2019) to contrast them with the planning narratives. Using this frame, the article is set to decenter the geographical North, as a metropolis, and highlight the concentration of knowledge and power within various (Southern) cities, resulting in two interrelated provocations. First, this position pushes the need to understand cities in their own right and not in opposition to the metropolitan theory. Second, it decenters the focus on developing Southern theories to rebut the dominance of theory making from the North but signal toward alternative intersectional theorization within the South. I take the planning exercises as a means for this analysis, although it should be noted that the same could be carried out using various other vantage points.

Modern urban planning has a lot in common with the tradition of modern science and its methodologies (Nandy 1988) and is inherently devised to help the state (colonial or otherwise) to dominate, control, and inflict violence (Pedrazzini, Vincent-Geslin, and Thorer 2014; Desai, Mahadevia, and Sanghvi 2020). As Watson (2009) pointed out, urban planning has developed using a few cases from European-American cities or the “metropolis.” The metropolitan concerns have now become the concerns of the periphery (Connell 2011), leading to a skewed understanding of the urban and the dominant citizens taking control over this understanding (Baviskar 2003; Zimmer, Cornea, and Véron 2017). The call for shifting the loci of urban theory to the South (Connell 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Parnell and Oldfield 2014) is on the premise that, because the theory was developed using a few Northern examples, broadening this base and speaking from the South will widen urban theory. Such a position takes knowledge out of its politics and falls into the very trap that Southern theory wants us to escape. Shifting the loci of urban theory via epistemological tweaking (Roy 2005; Brenner and Schmid 2015), which entails more studies to understand the South and beyond, relegates the hegemonic structure to misplaced cases from the South. To have a Southern viewpoint, we need to first have studies to identify this formation and mobilization of knowledge hegemony.

In this light, the article does not focus on questionable scientific methods of urban planning (Jacobs 1992) but on the knowledge hegemony that it facilitates, as a means to develop Southern theory perspectives. I argue that the reductionist science (Shiva 1987) of planning constructs the artificial difference between experts and nonexperts, thus creating a structure vulnerable to and expediting the knowledge hegemony of the metropolitan understanding of cities. For a Southern shift, we need to counter this intellectual imperialism (Alatas 2000), which could be done via an ontological probing. The article, therefore, is a modest experiment on one such form of ontological probing by juxtaposing planning histories and urban narratives from the cities of Colombo and Delhi and theoretically and geographically decentering the metropolis. The planning narrative is investigated using the first and the latest spatial plans in Colombo and Delhi. In Colombo, the first plan was published in 1921 (Geddes 1921) and the latest one in 2016 (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development 2016). In Delhi the first plan was issued in 1962 (Delhi Development Authority 1962) and the latest one in 2007 (Ministry of Urban Development 2007). The analysis of the planning documents is complemented by investigating two street food practices. In Delhi I investigate the momo sector and in Colombo the rice packet sector, both using in-depth qualitative interviews of twenty respondents each.

In the following section, I develop how, via the discussions on Southern theory, our knowledge about the urban is agreed (by scholars) to be biased. I make the case that for the cities to be read in their own right, we need to enunciate the knowledge production nexus and counter it through an ontological inquiry. Thereafter, in the ensuing two sections, I develop this position via reading, first, the planning history of Colombo and Delhi and, second, the everyday narratives therein. I finally conclude with a call for more efforts in an epistemological rupture and ontological restructuring toward Southern theory-building exercises.

**Southern Theory and Southern City**

The critique of urban theory is that it is heavily Western (North Atlantic); thus, the response has
been to incorporate the leftover non-Western societies to broaden its scope and applicability—toward a global urban theory (Lawhon and Truelove 2020). Even though the origins of the urban theory have been in the West, its application has not been limited to the geography of its parochial roots. Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey (2015) pointed out in the context of non-Western academic research that this “relationship to theory is dependent, derivative, and often deeply alienated” (42). It is this alienation that forces us to describe non-Western urbanization almost always with a prefix, be it informal, illegal, or even Southern. I do not contest these works, which in their own right have been great attempts at theorizing from non-Western cities. The need to place these conceptualizations in a subservient relation to the real social, economic, political, and objective; however, the rendering of the future itself is to avoid unfettered universalism as well as callow regionalism, to escape the lure of describing how the urban in the periphery is different from the metropolis (cf. Schindler 2017) or to introduce regional epistemologies into urban theory to understand the reality of the urban periphery (cf. Connell 2014). Needless to say, the tradition of enlightenment, emphasizing abstract concepts to know reality and the subject–object binary, which has long been criticized (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr 2002), forms a significant part of metropolitan urban theory today. I tackle this larger issue through the narrow lens of planning and city building. Planning is argued to be influenced by colonial relations (Legg 2007; Wood 2019), political economy (Nagaraj 2016; Holgersen 2020), and the politics of power within a city (Truelove and Mawdsley 2011; McFarlane and Silver 2017). For this article, though, I investigate the instruments of planning itself and how the city that is conceptualized outside of planning dominates it.

What makes planning scientific is its claim to objectivity, although its overt focus has been on social engineering, based on ideological notions. Conceptually, the planning exercises start with data collection, based on predefined categories, and are presented in two dominant forms. First, data show the lacunae of the city; for example, housing deficit or water shortage. Second, the data are presented with a future projection that shows what needs to be done today to be able to accommodate future growth (e.g., land use changes, new infrastructure requirements). Because these data are meant to represent reality and are argued to be not dependent on ideological inclinations, they are rendered objective and scientific, and consequently planning itself is rendered as a scientific process. These scientific data are then structured under a vision, which becomes the baseline to define deliverable goals in the master plan or other similar planning and policy documents. Söderström (1996) inquired into this progression, by looking into the mapping processes. Using a science and technology studies framework, he outlined the genealogy of instruments that are used in planning exercises and explained the formation of planning as a scientific field. He summarized:

Social cartography partakes therefore of an analysis of the city with claims to scientifcity whose ambition was the objectivization of social problems. It represented in turn one of the principal vectors in the fabrication of a new figure: the expert in urban matters, called upon to supplant the local citizen and his [her] “ordinary” knowledge. (Söderström 1996, 272)

The urban expert supplanted the ordinary knowledge by using scientific data and mapping tools. These abstracted representations of the city are then used to plan for the future, which could claim itself to be objective; however, the rendering of the future itself is subjective and exclusionary (Peters 2019). This brief outline highlights how the instruments to construct what a city is or what it ought to be are missing from the toolkit of planning. None of the scientific instruments used or methods outlined in
planning exercises can justify how, who, and by what means we decide or depict what a city is or what it should be. In the absence of methods that describe what a city is or what it should be, planning is merely a tool that at best uses (even if scientific; Behrend and Levin-Keitel 2019) methods to make a city, which has already been conceptualized for it. Furthermore, the narrative on what a city is or should be, in turn, becomes a planning tool for public communications (Sandercock 2003; van Hulst 2012), although understood to be hegemonic in nature (cf. Ernwein and Matthey [2019] on urban events; Mager and Matthey [2015] on storytelling). It should also be noted here that the city conceptualization is not merely a domain of, or affected by, planning alone; for example, see James’s (2020) discussion on the conception of world-class in Mumbai and imagination of identities for the growth of the stand-up comedy industry or Radicati’s (2019) illustration of the continued process of island imagery making of Sri Lanka in Colombo’s fishing communities.

When the planning exercises operationalize its tools to achieve this preconceived city, of course, conflict arises. The plan is rendered scientific, and the irrational city and its ordinary citizens need to mend their ways of life to conform to these plans. These conflicts can be categorized into two clusters, both of which also represent research being carried out on urban and urbanization processes. First, because the planning exercises are deliberated from abstract data, it does not fit the realities of the city. Thus, the state engages in violent forms of domination to suppress any dissent to implement the plan; for example, aggressive demolitions of so-called slums in the name of development. Second, the implemented (partially at times) planning exercises lead to alternate and altered forms of urban living and being; for example, unauthorized housing, varied citizenship formations, and alternate access to utilities. There has been a vast array of studies on both the violent forms of state domination (Perera 1998; Baviskar 2016; Fuglerud 2017; Mahadevia and Desai 2019) and alternate forms of living and multiplicities of urbanism (Simone 2012; Oldfield and Greyling 2015; Anand 2017; Ghertner 2017), which have broadened the boundaries of our understanding about the urban and urbanization processes.

In such a scenario, the question that arises is, what then is the need for a southern theory, or why should we look at cities in their own right? The answer to this question lies in the nexus of urban knowledge production. If the knowledge production nexus behind the city conceptualization is not explored, then we end up with an overt focus on epistemology (Walker 2015; Halvorsen 2018), on how to know the South, which is rendered as very different from the real “urban.” In this regard, I build on the literature that investigates multiple lived experiences and urban processes to highlight the formation of the metropolises within cities.

City conceptualization is the core notion that is needed for any urban planning or policy intervention. By city conceptualization I mean the notion of (1) what a particular city is and (2) what it should be. Framing city conceptualization using these two questions projects it as a political process outside of the domain of objective planning and policymaking processes. This exclusion, however, is precisely because of the objective and scientific notions, around which the idea of planning as a discipline and policymaking as a governance action is constructed. The scientific planning exercise can be very closely compared to modern science being developed in a laboratory (Söderström 1996). Shiva (1987) argued this with regard to arbitrary parameters of reductionist science:

Controlled experiments in the laboratory is a central element of the methodology of reductionist science. The object of study is arbitrarily isolated from its natural surroundings, from its relationship with other objects and observer(s). The context (the value framework) so provided determines what properties are perceived in nature, and leads to a particular set of beliefs about nature.

There is threefold exclusion in this methodology: (i) ontological, in that other properties are not taken note of; (ii) epistemological, in that other ways of perceiving and knowing are not recognized; and (iii) sociological, in that the non-expert is deprived of the right both of access to knowledge and of judging the claims of knowledge. (246)

I see this threefold exclusion as interrelated, primarily captured by the nonexpert narrative or experience of the city, (1) which is excluded from planning and city-making exercises, (2) whose knowing is not recognized, and (3) who has no claims and rights to the knowledge being produced about the city. I use this central notion to argue
toward a Southern theory that is not in opposition to (hence determined by) the North or West, using the notion of Global South as “time-limited concept-metaphor” (Lawhon and Truelove 2020, 14). My interest here in Southern theory is not just to understand when theory travels from North (metropolis) to South (periphery) or its situated appropriations (Lemanski 2014; Morrell 2016), a mode of inquiry that can be posited—cities as metropolis (e.g., London or Paris being the metropolis and Delhi or Colombo being the periphery). Contrarily, I am interested in understanding how knowledge is produced and practices are mobilized within the South (or even within the North), leading toward uncovering the formation of hegemonic structures, a mode of inquiry that can be posited as metropolises within the city. This is what I meant by interiorized ontology, to not only ask the question of “what is there to know?” but to ask this question in a manner by which cities across the globe are seen in their own right. If all cities (global or otherwise) are seen in their own right (Robinson 2011), then the tautological exercise of defining and determining how the South is different is eliminated. This elimination of difference or rather agreeing to the differences between all of the cities also eliminates the need to inquire cities outside the north in antiquated vernacular conducts and historical intellectual traditions but through contemporary ethos. This emphasis on the contemporary is to primarily highlight the knowledge hegemony, as Banerjee (2006) argued (with regard to colonialism):

This internal non-contemporaneity disallowed the coming face-to-face of peoples of the nation in practical negotiation, and led to a domination by a form of self-knowledge, which was necessarily representational, wherein the non-present had to be first represented by the modern subject-agent of history. (22)

With this frame, the metropolis that yields power and knowledge must exist in all cities and beyond. The frame would involve bringing the knowledge–power relations that regional geographers have been inquiring about into the political boundaries of the city itself (Paasi 1991, 2003), a mode of inquiry that I described earlier as metropolises within the city. Therefore, Southern theory does not need a North for its existence but can be inquired, contested, and built from within and beyond the North–South division. Furthermore, Wachsmuth (2014) argued for the city as an ideological representation of the broader urbanization process:

In the context of the contemporary North Atlantic, “the city” is a form of appearance corresponding only partially and problematically to urban reality. Or, rather, realities in the plural: critical geographical scholarship shows that they are multiple, complex, and contradictory. But the concept of the city obscures this multiplicity, at the very same time that it is a product of it. The city is an ideological representation of urbanization processes rather than a moment in them. (77, italics in original)

The ideology that dominates this representation and modes of contesting it needs to be explored. I would add to Wachsmuth’s (2014) argument that cities obscure the multiplicity by mobilizing dominant ideology by means of city conceptualization. This city conceptualization from Colombo as a commercial city to Delhi as a historic capital or Paris as a city of love to Brussels as the center of Europe enables the mobilization of certain violent forms of development agendas, which can only be countered by countering the very city conceptualization. Coming back to my narrow focus, planning and city conceptualization, I now build the knowledge production aspects of it in Colombo and Delhi.

Narrative 1: Master Planning in Colombo and Delhi

In this section, I outline the conceptualization of Colombo and Delhi in their respective master plans to primarily show (1) that the fabrication of city conceptualizations is circumvented in the planning exercises and (2) consequently the city conceptualizations used in master plans do not alter. It is empirically difficult to formulate how the city conceptualization initially came into being; therefore, my inquiry in both the cities traces the city conceptualizations to their respective first master plans.

The current master plan of Colombo is set within the larger aim to aid “Sri Lanka’s forward march to achieve the status of ‘A High Income Developed Country’” (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development 2016, 2, boldface in original). The document outlines this aim in the introductory chapter and then moves on to present data under various headings, from location and land area, to marine assets, to archeological sites and monuments.
Thereafter, the projection of these data with regard to future growth is presented under sections of (1) economic and employment projection, (2) economic model, (3) demographic projection and distribution, and (4) employment and population distribution. The categories of data and the projections are both aligned to the economy-centered aim mentioned earlier. Subsequently, the various mechanisms that will aid in achieving this aim are presented. Colombo in the master plan is not just seen as a city in itself, but its role is envisaged within the country of Sri Lanka. It is conceptualized as a city that can push Sri Lanka up to the desirable league of high-income developed countries. The goals and projects that are outlined later in the document all complement the economic goal and role of the city.

We can trace this conceptualization of Colombo back to at least 1921 when the first planning document was published (Geddes 1921). The first planning document was written by visiting invited planner Patrick Geddes. When Geddes was invited, planning was seen as a luxury, as well as a means to constrain haphazard growth (Perera 2008). Geddes presented his plan by circumventing both of these concerns. First, Geddes emphasized the significance of Colombo as an economically important city for the then British Empire, highlighting how it was the third most important port of the empire and fifth in the world. This significance of Colombo, Geddes argued, demanded plans for growth and expansion and using that growth to benefit the whole of Sri Lanka (and consequently the British Empire). We see the conceptualization of Colombo, at least a century ago, in a similar fashion of it being an economic keystone in the progress of Sri Lanka. The conception of Colombo by Geddes was deeply embedded in the colonial concerns of economic plunder (Perera 2008; Jazeel 2009), which have been carried forward in the later plans, albeit with a nationalist tone in the postindependence articulations.

The latest master plan of Delhi starts by introducing it as “Delhi, the focus of the socio-economic and political life of India, a symbol of ancient values and aspirations and capital of the largest democracy, is assuming increasing eminence among the great cities of the world” (Ministry of Urban Development 2007, 1), outlining that the “Vision-2021 is to make Delhi a global metropolis and a world-class city” (Ministry of Urban Development 2007, 1).

The master plan enunciates the interrelated notions of global metropolis and the world class via various planning schemes and regulations. The plan foresees accommodating the growing population in the urban agglomerations outside the city of Delhi, as the city itself has a distinct and unique feature to be preserved. The idea of a global metropolis is for it to be a figurehead of India’s modernity and world class as a judgment with respect to spectacular infrastructure. It envisions Delhi as a showcase city, which will be part of the great cities of the world, by producing a picture-perfect city and tackling the population problem. We can see here a clear divergence from the conceptualization of Colombo, although its roots can similarly be traced back to the first master plan.

The first Delhi master plan (Delhi Development Authority 1962) was positioned within two dominant narratives. The first was to deal with the colonial concerns of congestion (overpopulation) of the city and the resulting deterioration of the physical infrastructure (Legg 2006). The second narrative showcased the postindependence Nehruvian ethos of embracing modernity and showing the world that India has come out of the shackles of its past (Prakash 2002; Singh, Kahlon, and Chandel 2019). The studies for the first master plan were outlined both cases, the state has engaged in violent implementation of the respective plans. Much of the critique in this milieu has been limited to the (1) ill-conceived planning and the resulting brutality of the state (Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Gherter 2015; Baviskar 2016; Fuglerud 2017) and (2) adaptation mechanisms adopted due to the plan(s) (Dayaratne and Samarawickrama 2003; Benjamin 2008). However, the violence of urbanization is emanating from city conceptualization and not the plan itself or the state action, both of which are a
result of the city conceptualization and cannot be read in isolation. This city conceptualization has not been contested, nor has it been changing (Narayanan 2019b). To question the city conceptualization, we need a twofold strategy. The first step is to understand the formation of city conceptualizations (even if partially). In the current section, I have tried to do this using the master plans. The second step is a means to record alternate city conceptualizations, which I do in the following section using everyday narratives from street food vendors.

Connell (2011) argued that the metropolis, as the center of power and knowledge, operates a certain hegemony, escaping itself from being contested. Similarly arguing about the universalization of Western philosophy, Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey (2015) argued for the internalization of history of philosophy within philosophy, as a tactical move that relegated historicization (and thus provincialization) of Western philosophy. The conceptualization of the city follows both of these tactical placements. First, city conceptualization is rendered outside of the scientific planning and has not been contested; rather, its outcome (the plan itself) has always been the object of scrutiny. Second, the city conceptualization is presented with a signifier (e.g., megapolis, world class, smart city), thus subsuming history within these signifiers and relegating itself from historicization. In this manner, city conceptualization can be seen as a metropolis that operates within the city. An understanding of the city conceptualization as a hegemonic knowledge vector can aid in the creation of an alternate political tool for Southern theory.

**Narrative 2: Everyday City**

From around noon until around 3:00 p.m., the streets and small shops in Colombo are stocked with rice (and curry) packets. These packets, with various combinations and prices, are consumed by people for lunch. Similarly, after around 4:00 p.m. until around 9:00 p.m. on the streets of Delhi, momo (dumpling) stalls pop up, offering several varieties that form part of the evening snacks. I compare these two street foods and practices around them as an experiment to circumvent the centrality of the planning exercises; therefore, legal parity of street vending regulations is assumed herein (cf. Bhowmik 2005). I read the street food narrative with two themes at two different scales: (1) conceptualization of the city and (2) relations and claim to space within this conceptualization.

Let us understand these diverse street food sectors by tracing Nagasuri, who sells rice packets in Colombo, and Badal, who sells momos in Delhi. Nagasuri was a government employee and had to retire early as his health deteriorated. To supplement his pension, he wanted to engage in a business that would not be physically strenuous. One of his acquaintances who produces rice packets told him about the business. The model is fairly simple: His acquaintance, locally referred to as a contractor, produces rice packets and gives them to him for sale. Nagasuri sells these packets for lunch and gets a commission on each packet sold. The contractor takes the leftover rice packets without any penalty. This deal suited Nagasuri and he agreed. The commercial relationship between rice packet vendor and contractor remains similar across Colombo; only the commission rates change. The contractor suggested a spot to Nagasuri in front of a government institution where there were many prospective buyers. The contractor in his initial days (in the early 1980s) used to produce and sell the rice packets around this area. There are vendors who both produce and sell the rice packets, but this limits the sale to one vending spot. Contractors, on the other hand, supply to a greater number of vendors. Nagasuri reaches the spot at around 10:45 a.m. and sets up a table. He stores the table and umbrella next to the institution gate and the institution’s guards make sure that it is safe. Nagasuri, due to his previous job as a government employee, is on good terms and commands a certain respect from the security guards. The contractor usually arrives at around 11:00 a.m. and gives the rice packets to Nagasuri. Nagasuri sells these packets until around 3:00 p.m., after which the contractor collects the leftovers and he goes back home. Nagasuri lives in a house outside the Colombo municipality limits.

On the other hand, Badal came to Delhi when he was eighteen to work in the momo sector, which was introduced to him by a friend from his village. He started working as a casual laborer at a momo manufacturing center in Chirag Dilli (an urban village inside Delhi). Slowly, over time, he gained skills and moved to more specialized cooking processes. Badal’s day starts at around 11:00 a.m. when he goes to the manufacturer’s home, who uses the upper floor of his house as a manufacturing center. Making
momos is a tedious job and Badal finishes around 3:00 p.m. when the owner sets out to the vending spot. Badal spends most of his time in Chirag Dilli as do all his friends, who also happen to be working for various momo manufacturers, and they spend their time within the settlement.

Talking about the city, both Nagasuri and Badal use the vantage point to their workplace. For Nagasuri, his vending job provides a supplementary income and he sees no need to expand this. His view of Colombo is that of an agglomeration that allows his vending.

There are many people who come to Colombo for work. I cater to these people. This street [referring to his vending spot] is busy and people have no time to cook. I provide a service so that the people can work.

Nagasuri imagines Colombo as a work-based space, where people from outside come, do their respective jobs, and leave. He does not see it as an economic hub of production but rather as a cluster of institutions that allows for his vending business. Contrarily, Delhi for Badal is a place of opportunities. It is a city he migrated to because of economic prospects. Both Nagasuri and Badal are able to make money due to the concentration of people in their respective cities. For Badal, though, the city presents a career option that he can use to garner respect back in his village, as he claims:

There is no money there [in his native village] and without a job, people think that you are lazy. Now when I go back home [for yearly holidays], people respect me and I am seen as an adult capable of doing a job. No one asks what I do, but they adore that fact that I am in Delhi.

The narratives of Nagasuri and Badal are to be seen as a tool for questioning and politicizing city conceptualization. Koster (2020) argued toward incorporation of ethnography in situating urban theory and informing urban planning. I would like to take this argument further and narrow it to city conceptualization, in an attempt to situate the everyday narratives as a political tool for southern theory. Nagasuri’s view of vending as an income supplement and the city as a place without much aspiration is in contrast to the planner’s view of Colombo as a future bustling hub of South Asia. Similarly, Badal’s aspirations for career growth and his view of Delhi as a city of opportunities are in contrast to the planner’s view of Delhi as a showcase sedentary city. This juxtaposition, between the expert and nonexpert, is made to point out that city conceptualization is a multifaceted and plural entity. Furthermore, we can see the threefold exclusion (as discussed earlier) of city conceptualization by Nagasuri and Badal. Their conceptualization is excluded and is in contrast to the planning conception of the respective cities. Their knowing is not recognized and they have no claims and rights to the knowledge being produced about the city. This is disenfranchising in the case of Badal, who risks his livelihood, if the planning conception of Chirag Dilli as a sedentary heritage complex comes into effect.

Moving forward, over the years, Nagasuri found another contractor who promised a better commission. Because it made economic sense, Nagasuri shifted and stopped taking rice packets from the initial contractor. The contractor–vendor relationship in the rice packet sector is not just purely commercial but one that is bound in sociocultural ethos. Nagasuri’s shift was perceived as a betrayal of trust by the original contractor. The contractor told me that he feels hurt but is not angry; nonetheless, he introduced a new vendor next to Nagasuri. The new vendor is from the contractor’s village and used to work for him in the kitchen where the rice packets are made. Because there are a lot of prospective buyers, neither Nagasuri nor the contractor felt any loss in business, apart from the initial slowdown. The new vendor and Nagasuri are not in good terms and their disagreement is well known to those who buy rice packets in this area.

Over time in Delhi, Badal wanted to be an entrepreneur and sell momos himself. He convinced the momo manufacturer for whom he worked to sell some to him. There was no loss of business to the manufacturer, and he agreed. Badal now sells momos at the boundary of Chirag Dilli. He considers this a step toward staring his own momo business. He is able to sell the momos he buys but would like to scale up. The constraint for his plan is the vending spot. Over the years, he has made friends in Chirag Dilli and knows the local political dynamics to set up a vending point. The boundary of Chirag Dilli is not very crowded, however, and he wants to sell his momos outside a metro station. Setting up a vending spot requires a thorough knowledge of the network, which involves bribes and mutual social contracts, which take a long time to build or are inherited. Schindler (2014) discussed these coexisting
multiplicities of governance in Delhi in detail using everyday negotiations and transgressions. Similarly, Hilbrandt (2019) illustrated the significance of social and spatial relations in the power dynamics of everyday practices. Badal understands these nuances but often ventures to the nearby metro stations to look for a prospective partner. Badal has not yet been able to find a vendor or shopkeeper next to a metro station who would allow him to set up a vending spot.

Juxtaposing the claim to a vending spot in both cities presents an interesting dichotomy. In Colombo, although Nagasuri and the contractor were in conflict, neither of them could stake a claim or attempted to stake a claim over the vending spot. Their rivalry has not resulted in the territorialization of the squatted footpath that they use for selling rice packets. Contrarily, in Delhi, the vending spot is a contested and hard-to-find commodity. The key knowledge to establish a vending spot in Delhi includes complex socioeconomic networks with the local shops, residents, municipal officials, and the police. Vending is legal in both Colombo and Delhi, although usage of the footpath is restricted in both cities. However, we see different ownership claims to public space. In Colombo the footpath is used but is not claimed as a possession by those vendors using it. In Delhi, however, those already using the footpath lay claim to that space and restrict the newer entrants. Cornia (2020) theorized about the spatial and territorialized practices used by associations of residents (clubs) to appropriate systems of control in urban West Bengal. Badal’s failure to secure a vending point near the metro station shows a similar territorialized practice for control, although the institution in this case is a disjointed collaboration between various agents and individualized interests.

The territorial relation to the common footpath is different in Colombo and Delhi. However, acceptability of this situation in both cases arises from the respective city conceptualizations. When I asked Nagasuri how he feels about the new vendor, he expressed his dislike. The business is usually not affected on weekdays, but on weekends with fewer customers, it still matters. When I prompted that he was the first one to establish a vending point (as opposed to the new vendor), though, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “It is like that.” For Nagasuri’s Colombo, where everyone comes to work and leaves, the openness of public space claiming is evident. On the contrary, Badal’s Delhi is an economic hub. To a similar probing of why people do not allow him next to a metro station, he said, “It affects their business.” Not letting it go, I emphasized hypothetically how a cigarette seller might lose business to a momo vendor, to which Badal replied:

> It is all fixed, the money to be paid, the people to be seen [phrase to emphasize bribery and social contracts]. When someone new comes that balance is broken and everything needs to be renegotiated. The share [both monetary and effort] may go up. So why take risk? But it is business and I am working on creating a nice deal.

This variegated relationship between the user and the public space is in stark contrast to the planning conceptualization of it as sanitized and devoid of vendors. When the city conceptualization is taken out of the planning and policy realm, then these relationships to space, the claims that citizens make, and the usage of public space become the notion to explore the plurality of city conceptualization. If the city conceptualization has been made into a metropolis by the planning apparatus, then the countering of this hegemony needs to incorporate the alternate narratives.

**Conclusion**

Outlining the depiction of Native American agglomerations, Wilson (2013) wrote:

> Cahokia was the largest city north of Mexico and comparable in size to European capitals such as London and Paris during the same period. (Significantly, however, scholars still sometimes refer to it as a village, while many smaller Old World communities, such as medieval Bristol, are invariably described as cities.) (134, italics in original)

Wilson (2013) argued that the Native American cities were reduced as insignificant, primarily because cities are the mark of civilization. To render Native American civilization as backward, their cities needed to be conceptualized as subpar or not at all cities. The politics of rendering of Native American cities as subpar was for settler domination. It is in a similar manner that the deviant urban forms of non-Western cities are rendered as parochial.

Southern theory exposes the formation of the metropolis, which are the centers of power and knowledge. In this regard, various research has illustrated how the minority of agglomerations across the
North Atlantic have dominated urban theory. Thus, constructing a mode, which investigates “cities as metropolis,” enriching both Southern and urban theory (Robinson 2006; Connell 2011). This mode highlights the domination of certain cities (or theorization of or from certain cities), conceptualizes them as the metropolis, and investigates the underlying effects of it on (global) urban theory. This mode also has an in-built vulnerability of rendering periphery through the vantage point of the metropolis. This vulnerability has resulted in three primary limitations. First, research on the geographical South is becoming a quintessential criterion to be termed Southern theory. Connell (2011) pointed to the danger of doing this, which might reinforce the hegemony of the metropolis by making concerns of the metropolis as the concerns of the periphery. Furthermore, Lawhon and Truelove (2020) pointedly critiqued this approach as inept and inadequate for developing Southern theory. Second, to assert the first approach, it is necessary to find empirical evidence to describe how cities in the South are different. This difference is theoretically impossible without pitching them against the idealized Western cities (cf. Schindler 2017), which again is a sociopolitical construct. Such framings either lead to a developmentalist view of non-Western cities as “catching up” or a romanticized view of them being frontiers of “new forms of agglomerations.” The third limitation is to render antiquated thought systems in the periphery as a counter to the metropolis and as a driving factor in outlining the thinking about non-Western cities. Although there is historical and intellectual value in understanding such thought systems (cf. Connell 2014; Craggs and Neate 2020), it is essentially rendered as a counter to the knowledge created in the metropolis (leading to the first point).

If Southern theory is to broaden the horizons of our urban understanding, then all cities need to be seen as contemporary and consequently modern (Robinson 2006; Santos 2012), pointing to the need to read cities in their own right. To this end, this article has presented an alternate mode of inquiry, which can be posited as metropolises within the city. This mode relegates the need to read cities through the North Atlantic framings, where urban theory is traditionally rooted. It is a call toward a more dynamic reading of the metropolis that transcends the geographical North–South encounter. If metropolis means the center of knowledge and power, then the geography of the metropolis is not just limited to the West (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), nor to the city itself (McFarlane, Silver, and Truelove 2017), thus pointing by this mode toward investigating the formation of metropolises within cities. Problematizing the metropolis, I have illustrated that city conceptualization within (any) city can be read as a metropolis. Therefore, it becomes theoretically possible to mobilize Southern theory (investigate concentration of power and knowledge) with any city, without needing a geographical North.

Through the analysis of empirical data, I have identified city conceptualization as one such metropolis and outlined the manners in which it functions. City conceptualization, which is the fundamental base for spatial planning, is devised outside of it. Spatial planning subsumes the critique of city conceptualization and blurs the hegemonic formation of urban knowledge. Furthermore, the city conceptualization is a plural endeavor illustrated through everyday narratives as well as state actions, although a few become dominant and posit as the sole rendering or reading of the city. These various city conceptualizations dictate action on and in the city, both at a planning level and as an everyday politics of space. For example, Nagasuri’s and Badal’s conceptions of the city led to the unique manner in which they use, operate, and claim space in the city. Similarly, the planning conception of the city enables it to inflict violence, which would otherwise be unacceptable in our modern world. If the manner in which cities are conceptualized (e.g., Cahokia as a village) is what dictates the hegemony, then the city conceptualization itself is the metropolis and this metropolis is beyond the North–South encounter. Furthermore, we need a deeper inquiry into the political potential of viewing cities in their own right and the role of Southern theory in it, as Lawhon and Truelove (2020) summarized:

Starting from the south as a location (as a site of empirical difference or alternative knowledge traditions) does not inherently transcend this; juxtaposition can but does not necessarily serve this purpose. Taking this proposition seriously requires not just more research, different social networks or the examination of different intellectual traditions. Moving beyond, but not in conflict with the demand for inductive and inclusive approaches raised above, it argues for a fundamental evaluation of a researcher’s ability to recognize and work to—always imperfectly—
obviate the fundamental rationality that informs the so-called north–south encounter. (10, italics added)

This inductive approach mentioned earlier is what I built on as interiorized ontology. The inquiry into city conceptualization can be seen only as one of the ways in which we can theoretically and geographically dislocate the metropolises. A diverse set of dislocation strategies is needed to counter the Western or Northern located-ness of the metropolises and for Southern theory to operate beyond merely being an opposition to the North.

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1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

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