Dislocating Urban Theory: Learning with Food-Vending Practices in Colombo and Delhi

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Abstract:

Urban theory, produced in North Atlantic centres, has been perpetrated as universal and recent urban studies have pointed to the limits of this theory, calling for a southern turn. The southern call is to dislocate the concentration of power and knowledge in the metropolis. Owing to this concentration, concerns of the metropolis often becomes (or made to become) concerns of the periphery. Taking informality as a practice, not embedded in people (marginalized) or places (settlements), I will outline how the study of informality has assured the lineage of metropolitan concerns. Moving away from informal-formal dichotomy, the paper mobilizes, informal-urban dialectic to identify and dislocate the metropolitan concerns of urban theory. Discussing empirical cases from Delhi and Colombo, I build a narrative of academic theorization of informality and juxtapose it with everyday narrative of its practitioners (food vendors), arguing towards the need for a plural and radically non-global knowledge production politics.

Keywords: Urban Informality, Southern Theory, Knowledge Hegemony, Street Food, South Asia.

Introduction

During one of my fieldworks in the early 2020, I was interacting almost on a daily basis with Mishra. Mishra is a part-time vegetable vendor and part-time caterer in an upscale Delhi neighbourhood. As we got acquainted, he became interested in my work. I told him my research topic is on informality, while struggling to find an equivalent Hindi word/phrase (Hindi being the language of our conversations). After multiple failed attempt from my side, I finally was able to capture the crux of my work: 'I study activities that do not take state authorization, like your vegetable stall without permission, as opposed to say that cigarette shop, which is authorized by the municipality'. To this, Mishra immediately replied, 'I do not need authorization because I operate only in the morning, my stall is wrapped up by 9:00 AM, before anything else opens in this area'. We had a longer conversation that day where I explained, it is not the *need* I am interested in, rather to *understand* how the city works without state controls. Mishra nodded in agreement and with a condescending expression, ontologically proclaimed: 'what is there to know? *[Isme kya rakha hai?]*'

Next day I took a different approach and told Mishra: 'Planners [referring to the state planning authority] plan and regularize everything. However, there are many things which the planners neither account for, nor understand. Most of those things are activities without authorization/official-permission, and I want to understand how those things work'. Mishra snapped back, 'see, the city starts after 9:00 AM here, there are no cars, no shops, everything is closed before that. There are just people who take a morning walk and buy vegetables from me on their way back. There is no complexity to be managed by the planner in the morning, as the city is closed *[jab sab band pada hai to manage karne ke liya kya rakha hai]*'. This conversation continued for days and sometime in between he said something which has remained with me: 'aah! so you are doing this to write about it [as a purely academic exercise, which he compared to writing essays in school]'.

I start the paper with this snippet to point to the different realms of knowledge, interests, and needs. When I say that I study urban informality, academics understand and appreciate its value. Contrarily, Mishra, although understood what

I was doing, failed to capture why one would do that (apart from a merely academic exercise of writing). The binary of informal-formal makes no sense in his episteme, while I had spent years articulating what it means, by investigating practitioners like Mishra. It is this split in valuation of knowledge that I would like to use as a base in this article, to explore and experiment, the process of dislocating urban theory. I am not merely juxtaposing how the concept of 'informality' is important for me and not for Mishra, but investigating the processes that make it so, and urban theory's crucial role in this.

There have been multiple calls to diversify the urban and urban theory to give space for studies from the south (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2016; Schwarz and Streule, 2016). However, when investigating urban informality, one faces a conundrum, because informality has primarily been a subject of enquiry in/from the south, so much so, that there are critical works which are actively drawing attention to its existence and erasures in the north (Jaffe and Koster, 2019; Sheppard et al., 2020). Using this conundrum of (i) informality's major sites being the global south, and (ii) calls for more southern investigation (both theoretical and empirical), I explore what it means to dislocate urban theory and for whom, when thought through informality. Instead of Eurocentric or North Atlantic, I use the term metropolis to denote the concentration of knowledge and power. The metropolis-periphery terminology (instead of north-south) is used here to highlight the political nature of the metropolis and not its specific geographical location(s). Usage of the term metropolis theoretically allows for the possibility to see metropolises within the global south (domination of certain 'southern' cities) (cf., Mukhopadhyay et al., 2020; Palat Narayanan, 2020a; Sircar, 2017) as well as hegemonic formation within specific cities (beyond cities as metropolises) (c.f., Gibert, 2018; Palat Narayanan, 2021).

Furthermore, theory is to understand and articulate a phenomenon and construct a reality (in a constricted sense), e.g., feminist theory provides tools to articulate gender violence (among other aspects) which hitherto could only be experienced but was hard to express and thus fight against. This is generally true for *theories* built along multiple phenomena from colonialism to critical race, presenting a world to act/understand, as Mbembe (2021: 16) has powerfully articulated, "Theory is always a particular theory of the world." In this line of thinking, urban theory is to

understand the urban; however, the question is, for whom? Thus, rearticulating the question of dislocating urban theory in a different light: whom is this dislocation for? It is this question that I use as a backdrop for this article.

Dislocating urban theory

The global in urban theory

The call for dislocating urban theory, arises from a two-pronged critique (or why to dislocate urban theory). First, urban theory based out of few North Atlantic cities, has been perpetrated as universal, which in reality, is neither applicable nor useful in vast part of the urban world (Connell, 2011; Lemanski, 2014; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014; Sanders, 1992). Second, this universal nature, derives its authority from colonial/Eurocentric episteme, rooted deeply in the politics of knowledge production, which disenfranchises *other* forms of knowledge from *elsewhere* (Choplin, 2012; de Sousa Santos, 2009; Robinson, 2016; Roy, 2016). This disenfranchisement has led to trivialization of knowledge from *elsewhere*, both in and beyond the boundaries of North/West (Banerjee et al., 2015; Sanchez and Myat, 2021). Therefore, the countering of this metropolitan urban theory (or dislocating urban theory) could also be argued to be two-pronged. First, provincialization of Eurocentrism, which revisits the key concepts and enunciates its metropolitan locatedness (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020; Lawhon et al., 2016). Second, learning from knowledge being produced outside of the global metropolises, i.e., from the locations off the map of urban studies (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Connell, 2011). These two-pronged dislocation of urban theory has had multiple interventions, from adjusting metropolitan concepts to make it applicable in the periphery (Houssay-Holzschuch and Thébault, 2017; Lemanski, 2014), to reading the periphery in comparison to each other (or with the metropolis) towards developing newer theoretical understandings (Palat Narayanan, 2020b; Söderström, 2014); from reading the urban beyond the boundaries of the city (Brenner and Schmid, 2014; Negi et al., 2016), to reading the urban beyond the boundaries of the disciplines (Jazeel, 2018; Patel, 2006).

The two dislocation strategies are interrelated. What we call urban theory or *global* urban theory is metropolitan (thus the need to provincialize it as North Atlantic);

consequently we need alternate ways to understand the urban (as our urban theory has now been reduced to North Atlantic urban theory), which obviously comes from lesser studied/theorized locations i.e., global south (thus displacement). The term south and north are mobilized in the literature, both as a geographical location as well as a political position, although not always mutually exclusive. South as a location (at various scales) has been fruitful in countering metropolitan framings of the periphery and as urban exceptionalism (Parnell and Pieterse, 2016; Ren, 2021). Furthermore, South as a political position has been usefully mobilized to counter knowledge hegemonies across boundaries or within cities (Jazeel, 2019; Palat Narayanan, 2021). Although this project is in its preliminary stages (Gulbenkian Commission, 1996; Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Robinson, 2016), frequently discussed under the banner of southern theory in urban studies, it aims towards a *global* balance in the network of knowledge production. The term global is emphasized to highlight the embedded politics of this project which I will discuss below, drawing from Jazeel's (2019: 7) problematization that "…the very notion of a more 'global urban studies' unwittingly also leaves untended the conceptualization of the 'global'…"

Metropolitan theory's universal claims arise from the colonial episteme of western supremacy, of the western/white man having claims to objective knowledge (thus every other knowing becomes subjective) (Neilson, 2020) and the closely related construction of modern-primitive binary (Banerjee, 2006), traits of which can be found in the contemporary north-south distinctions (c.f., Banerjee et al., (2015) for a southern critique of theory). Connell (2011), Patel (2014), and Nigam (2020) (among many others) have already argued that the metropolitan theory is not a sole product of Europe (as a geographical location) but has proven influxes and influences from key intellectual traditions from various parts of the world. Nonetheless, Europe assimilated and made the external influences its own[i] (as produced solely in and by itself), the domination of which as 'universal/global' is referred to as Eurocentrism (Amin, 2009; Frank, 2008; Kannepalli Kanth, 2005). I do not intend to get into the critique of Eurocentrism here, but mean to point to one of its key traits: universal claims, from objective theory to universal human values – the *global*. Thus, when we aim to dislocate urban theory, are we mending its flaws (adding southern cases and

theories, which were hitherto absent) or are we against the colonial aspiration of *global* – of global understandings.

The southern critique of metropolitan theory is that it is neither applicable globally nor represents the globe, therefore, the need for a theory which learns, adapts, and appropriates experiences and knowledges from elsewhere. The constant factor in both the approaches is the need for a global: one based out of Eurocentrism and the other one learning from wider epistemes. There are two questions that this framework raises, first, why the global (dislocated) urban theory (in all its nuances and acceptance of knowledge from elsewhere) needed, and second, is this (or how is this) a possible project. I will concentrate on the former, as rejecting it makes the later irrelevant.

The quest for global urban theory bases itself on a similar colonial aspiration to know the world in totality. My critique is not about the aspiration, at least not in this article, but about the locationality of this aspiration. If urban theory is metropolitan then, will a dislocated urban theory (with all its nuances and acceptance of diverse epistemes) not be metropolitan centred? Metaphorically is it not the same demand as to have a benevolent king rather than putting the crown by which he draws his totalitarian power in a museum? Let us look at an example to make this point clearer. Knowledge becomes pertinent only when it is sought. I have a good understanding of my personal history, but others are not interested in this understanding, denying it the pedestal of knowledge. However, a similar understanding about the life of say Karl Marx is knowledge. Thus, it becomes pertinent to understand the process of what is sought and therefore what becomes knowledge or as Nigam (2020: 19) has pertinently put "Who determines what the agenda of the day for theory will be?" This process of determining the 'agenda' has been argued to be harmful, both in the global north (Connell, 1997) and the global south (Hennayake, 2021). Furthermore, my understanding of informality is knowledge (I publish in academic journals and my livelihood comes out of this knowledge), while it is of no interest for Mishra who operates informally (at least as I categorize informality). I am not arguing for a theory, which is popular. I am not arguing here for a dislocated urban theory which conceptualizes informality in a manner that Mishra finds useful. I am arguing for an understanding that the urban

theory and by virtue of it the dislocated urban theory is a privileged/metropolitan manifestation (Winkler, 2018) based on southern/periphery empirics.

Furthermore, the countering of universal applicability and learning from *elsewhere* has been problematic in the past too. Connell (2014) exploring alternate intellectual traditions from elsewhere, drew from upper caste (dominant) Brahmin intellectuals of India, cryptically reminding us of what B. R. Ambedkar (2014: 240) wrote in 1948, that "all scholarship is [just] confined to the Brahmins". Similarly, Ramanujan (1989) used Manu's differential laws[ii] to counter Kant's universalism. Both these local knowledge centres of Brahmins and Manu has been argued to be hegemonic and even dangerous (Anand Teltumbde, 2007; Babu MT, 2017; Manoharan, 2020). At a global level, it does shake the universal and objective nature of metropolitan knowledge. Nonetheless, it is Manu's theories (and writings) that keep a vast population of Dalits oppressed even today in India, Sri Lanka, and many other parts of the globe (c.f. Ambedkar (2014)). The concern about universality (or non-existence of universality) is a concern of the metropolis, as Mignolo (2005: 111) has argued, "There is no safe place and no single locus of enunciation from where the uni-versal could be articulated for all and forever." It is in this light, I want to focus on metropolitan concerns rather than metropolitan theory. This position will become clearer as a move below more specifically to urban informality.

It should be noted here that Southern Theory is a diverse position rather than a coherent theory. Lawhon and Truelove (2020) presents an outline of southern theory positions and its diversity in urban studies. The work on metropolitan hegemony of knowledge has also been under investigation in various domains for some time now and by many scholars who may not use the term Southern Theory. To glimpse the diversity of the southern position, we should keep in mind that the themes outlined above has been under investigation in science and technology studies (Nanda, 2015; Nandy, 1988), philosophy (Alatas, 2000; Mbembe, 2021), literature (Ramanujan, 1994), language (Babu MT, 2017), food studies (Ray, 2016), and disciplinary critiques (Scola et al., 2020) to name a few. Therefore the term Southern Theory in general as well as in urban studies should be read in the context of its diverse origins, developments, and positions.

The south in urban informality

Informality (informal sector) as a category of analysis gained prominence with the ILO country mission report on Kenya (ILO and UNDP, 1972) and work of Hart (1973). The study by Hart (1973) captured the *missing* labour and economy in Accra, which was not accounted for earlier. The methods (economics) of that time took note of and investigated activities that were registered by the state and therefore visible to it. Hart crafted a category of economic activities that did not fall in the then existing category of registered economic activities. I do not intend to have a deeper engagement with specifics of Hart's work here, but would like to point the similarity of his approach to contemporary urban debates for a southern turn. Economic theory (Eurocentric) could not capture the lived realities of people outside of the metropolis. Thus, Hart, investigated empirics from the south and pointed to theory's metropolitan rootedness. The economic theory was dislocated by learning(s) from the periphery. This dislocation had two aspects/stages, (i) pointing the insufficiency of metropolitan economic theory in capturing cases from Africa (provincialization), (ii) mitigating this insufficiency by investigating empirics from the periphery and diversifying metropolitan economic theory to incorporate the informal sector as a productive economic activity (learning from the south). Although not intended as such by Hart, informality thus forth became a southern trope (linked to impoverishment), a means to mitigate state insufficiency (as not having an agency), while any informality in the north became desirable conscious action (having an agency) (c.f. Devlin (2018); Esposito and Chiodelli (2020)). Hart's formulation of informality only diversified the metropolitan (economic) theory, while keeping its aspiration to be globally relevant, intact. The conceptualization of informality presents a case study of provincialization and displacement (to dislocate metropolitan theory), which can now be analysed in retrospect. The metropolitan theory was not being able to capture/understand the myriad economic practices in the periphery, thus, has been mitigated by the creation of informality as an analytical category, thereby prevailing the metropolitan concerns in the periphery. To this end, Hart's work, although relevant and much needed, nonetheless, sharpened the tools of the metropolitan theory than dislocating it, although it did provincialize and displace it.

Informality as a sector (economic categorization) has long been problematized. Informality today remains a contested notion, which has been conceptualized and reconceptualized multiple times along various focuses (Acuto et al., 2019; Boanada-Fuchs and Fuchs, 2018; Boudreau and Davis, 2017; Bunnell and Harris, 2012; Davis, 2017; McFarlane and Waibel, 2016; Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). A common thread in these investigations has been the manoeuvre to readjust the notion of informality, to capture aspects, which were excluded hitherto – an epistemic manoeuvre, to learn more about informality. Epistemological concerns around informality strengthened the concerns of metropolitan urban theory, by making the other (periphery) visible to the self (metropolis). Outside of informality studies, this epistemic manoeuvre created an urban, as distinct from the metropolitan urban (which is supposed to be the *real* urban), compelling many pertinent works to use a prefix to notify this othering (e.g., informal urbanism, or even, southern urbanism), a process critiqued by Nigam (2020: 58):

> We are really not doing very well in relying exclusively on Western knowledge and theory if the answer provided by it to all the questions is that the non-West, that is to say about 80 per cent of the world's population living outside Europe and [North] America, does everything wrong. Ask anyone who has been trained in the social sciences (which are constituted by that body of theoretical knowledge) and you will be told that there is something fundamentally wrong with 'us' and our societies: our modernity incomplete, our secularism is distorted, our democracy is immature, our development is arrested and even our capitalism is retarded!

If we ought to learn from the cases outside the west, how could, or why should, these cases be termed using a metropolitan gaze? If we eliminate the metropolitan concern, then the intent of learning *about* informality transforms to learning *from* informality (an ontological manoeuvre).

Jaffe and Koster (2019) have pointed out the subversion of the term informality outside the west. Outlining the knowledge hegemony, Jaffe and Koster (2019: 563, 564) pointing to informality's disjointed conceptions, argue:

… many urban scholars working in Western Europe and North America have tended to reproduce the stories that their governments like to tell: that these countries and their cities are governed in a formal fashion—if informality was ever a prevalent mechanism of governance here, it is a thing of the past, which now only occurs in corrupt and clientelist 'developing countries'…

If informality—such as personalized and non-transparent transactions, together with unregulated economic activities—is not framed as a thing of the past [in Western Europe and North America], it is understood as a marginal presence associated with pockets of poverty or immigrant groups.

In this sense, when we learn *from* informality, we enquire the hegemony of knowledge that is being produced by learning *about* informality. To learn *from* informality we need only a heuristic understanding, rather than an all-encompassing definition required to learn *about* informality. Herein, I mobilize informality as a practice not registered by the state, although coproduced, and altered by the state (cf., Palat Narayanan, 2019; Palat Narayanan and Véron, 2018). Informality as a practice helps us in understanding informality as delinked from people (e.g., urban poor, migrants) and places (e.g., slums, squatters), although practised by people in places. The practice-based approach, analytically opens the possibility of reading the same person practising both informal and formal practices, as well as, delineates the need to study informality merely from a planning and policy perspective, but incorporates cultural norms and social codes (cf., Palat Narayanan, 2019). Informality as a practice relegates the need for ethnocentric terms like informal settlements, a quintessential reminiscent of the Chicago School raking contemporary urban studies, which categorizes bodies in spaces using an epidemiology driven understanding (Connell, 1997; Rios, 2015). Further, the notion of state is neither fixed not static for all practitioners (Ghertner, 2017; Kornberg, 2020; Moatasim, 2019; Palat Narayanan, 2019). This makes the notion of informality as a practice (that I start with) and the conceptualization of practices by the practitioners, varied, contradictory, and inconsistent. These variations, contradictions, and inconsistencies become the ground for analysing informality beyond the metropolitan concerns. I use these variations, contradictions, and

inconsistencies in informality, in the following sections to argue towards a dislocated urban theory beyond its colonial aspiration to be global or globally relevant.

Methodology

If informality as a concept was derived out of metropolitan concerns, how can one study this (in the periphery or elsewhere)? This was the concern for my fieldwork which was part of a larger project studying/juxtaposing Colombo and Delhi. I use the term juxtapose rather than comparison, because the intent was twofold, (i) to investigate Colombo and Delhi in their own right, as detached cases, and (ii) to investigate Delhi by situating myself in Colombo and to investigate Colombo by situating myself in Delhi, as subjective cases. Taking cues from Detienne (2008), the cases studied/identified in both the cities were independent of each other without any initial plan to *compare* them. The analysis takes inspiration from what Hilbrandt et al. (2017: 947) have called "multi-sited individualizing comparison", which they outline as:

> Briefly, the approach combines two aims. On the one hand, in providing an in-depth analysis of each individual case, it accounts for contextual particularities. On the other hand, in allowing a juxtaposition of the insights gained from one case with those gained from other cases, it opens up the comparison to generalizations.

In Colombo, I studied the vending, production, and consumption practices around *bath* packets (packaged rice and curry for lunch). I followed an object, the *bath* packet, across Colombo (a fixed object rather than a fixed geographical boundary). In Delhi I investigated vending practices in a specific neighbourhood of South Delhi, i.e., as opposed to Colombo, in Delhi, the geographical location was fixed and the vended practices/objects varied (from lunch stalls to snacks). I used semi-structured interviews (20 in Colombo and 25 in Delhi) and participant observation as my primary methods. The aim was to capture the life stories (long-term) and the daily activities (routine) of those who engage in vending practices (sellers, producers, and users). In Colombo half the interviewed vendors were female, while in Delhi all were male. The customers were sampled for maximum variation to reflect an equivalent male-female ratio. The interviews and observations were not voice-recorded, but

were written down at the end of the day as field notes. All the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

In the following section, I discuss the empirics using two positions, one that of mine as a researcher, and others that of the practitioners, a method I used in the field. I start with my understanding of informality, to be able to discuss the process which the practitioners follow and thereafter contrast it with the concerns and conceptions of the practitioners, arguing towards a non-universal knowledge production politics.

Manifold registers and differential proxies of informality

In this section, I will discuss with Sharma, from Delhi (whom you have already met) and Chaturika, from Colombo.

Sharma sets up a vegetable stall outside an affluent South Delhi neighbourhood, early in the morning (by about 6:30 AM in winters and wrap-up by around 9:00 AM). His main clientele consists of residents returning from morning walks, or maids going to work. After vending vegetables, he starts to make lunch *tiffins* (box containing, rice, *chapati*, and two condiments), which he supplies to a nearby cluster of offices. He manages to sell around 30-35 *tiffins* per day, which he prepares at home, with help from his wife. Similarly, Chaturika prepares *bath* packets (a packet of rice and at least five condiments) at home, with the help from her mother and sister. She sells around 30 *bath* packets from a footpath stall in an upscale Colombo neighbourhood, from around 11:00 AM until 3:00 PM. The vending locations and the business itself, in both the cases, are not registered entities with the state, thus informal as per my definition.

After wrapping-up his vegetable stall, Sharma goes home and starts preparing lunch *tiffins* with his wife's help. He reach quite precisely at 1:00 PM in front of a row of offices, close to his house. Office workers come out for lunch at that time and in less than 5 minutes, all the *tiffins* that Sharma brings are sold. Sharma told me that his food is very good, because of which it sells fast. Which could be true because there were other vendors who did not finish selling their *tiffins* even long after Sharma was done. Continuing from our morning conversations (as described in the

introduction), we started discussing the registered nature of food being sold. Following is a rough reconstruction of our conversation:

> Me: Your business is going well. Why don't you register your business? [this was not a suggestion to register/formalize the business, but to understand Sharma's logic]

> Sharma: What is the use of registering?

> Me: It has checks, which ensures the qualities. For example, the food being sold in formal restaurants are checked for health concerns, so the owners are compelled to follow certain hygiene regulations, even if that impedes on their profit.

> Sharma: You saw my *tiffins* being sold out in minutes. Do you think those who bought, need a formal certificate to judge its quality?

> Me: Your food is OK, but there are others who bring their tiffins and do not have as good a sale as yours. If it is registered, people will know that many of them are good enough and then try.

> Sharma: It is their problem. Everyone knows my food is *sattvic*[iii], I do not use garlic or onion in my food and people trust my food.

> Me: What about evading troubles from officials if they come for checking?

> Sharma: I do my business in minutes, before anyone can even think about checking I am on my way back home [referring to the speed with which his *tiffins* were sold].

Sharma is an upper-caste Hindu surname and I was never told his first name. His claim to hygienic food (both materially and spiritually) was through his Brahmin identity, reinforced by *sattvic tiffin,* his surname, and its overtly frequent enunciations.

In Delhi there have been and are multiple attempts by the state to register/formalize hawking, using a myriad set of reasons, including but not limited to hygiene (Schindler, 2014). The statal notion of hygiene derives from a standard

set of *scientific* regulations, which could be implemented if vendors are registered (thus formal). The buyers operate in a different realm, where the notions of hygiene are derived from a different register. One of Sharma's buyers told me that it is vegetarian, so good for the *body*. Sharma has further imposed the notion of hygiene by it being *sattvic* (pure), prepared by a Brahmin, without using *polluting* onion and garlic. The caste-based understanding of purity and being good for health becomes a proxy for hygiene and health standards. Without going into the details of food orthopraxy, for one it could be ascertained that the proxies of formal systems (e.g., hygiene) are differentially perceived.

These conceptions become clearer when we look at Chaturika, who sells *bath* packets for lunch. In Colombo, *bath* packets and the kitchens where they get prepared, are checked by Public Health Inspectors. Chaturika has a *health certificate,* the number of which along with her contact details, are stamped on all the packets being sold. Chaturika draws the legitimacy of her *bath* packet business from this certificate and the quality of the food from the fact that it is prepared at home – *'gedara khaema'* (literally home food in Sinhala) an extended version of what she would have anyway cooked for her family. *Gedara khaema* is not merely any food prepared at home, but represents a certain level of value, both in quality of ingredients used and taste. The notion of *gedara khaema* is further enunciated by using the notion of *gamae khaema* (literally village food). Chaturika sells only *bath* packets and no other item like *fried rice* or *buriyani*, thus tapping on the emotional component of village cuisine to claim quality of her *bath* packets, on top of a health certificate which anyways most sellers have.

My questions to Chaturika on formally registering her business, were always replied with it already having a health certificate. This certificate is not an authorization to sell *bath* packets on the footpath or any other *unauthorized* location, as it clearly states. The certificate merely assures a minimum quality from a formal public health perspective. Almost all the *bath* packets being sold have a health certificate; nonetheless, this does not alter the hygiene perception regarding the *bath* packets, as Susith (a regular buyer) told me:

> You have to see who is selling it. *Bath* packet is easy to make, good money, and a lot of people use it as an opportunity. We know how good it can be [hygiene

wise] when we look at it. You can see the packaging, the person, and the location. Also once you eat a couple of times, you know where to buy.

Here the peripheral notions of packaging, vendors, and the vending locations become a proxy to ascertain the hygiene of the packets. This is in contrast to the health inspectors, who investigate the food itself and the place where it is prepared (although there being strict regulation pertaining to the bath packet's packaging materials in Sri Lanka).

With these two cases, I want to point to the plurality of rationalities and concerns, rather than the hygiene perception of food in Colombo and Delhi. Both Sharma and Chaturika have different meanings ascribed to informality. Sharma questioned the need for any form of formality and for him it was substituted by his upper-caste identity, and the related *sattvic* food that he sells. Furthermore, the notion of formality (registering a practice with the state) was evaded by Sharma's staunch stand that city is not present in the morning and his transaction of lunch *tiffins* are fast. Contrarily for Chaturika, the health certificate was formal enough to consider her business registered (or as good as registered). The quality beyond the public health certificate was drawn from her evocation of *gedara khaema* reminiscing the quality of home food.

It should be noted that in both Delhi and Colombo, many vendors face quite strict spatial controls, from the state as well as other actors. In the two cases I discuss, as the sale of food is quick and legitimized by its demand, it evades many such spatial constraints. In Delhi, Sharma is not bothered by registering his business, because it operates out of his house (production) and the sale component is so quick that he does not need to engage with the usual power dynamics to access a vending location. Contrarily in Colombo, *bath* packets evade the state's spatial control as it is considered to be temporary (only few hours a day). Chaturika, like many others in this business, avoid setting up their stalls on the main road (to avoid any alleged traffic blocks due to vehicles stopping to buy) as well as leave enough space on footpaths where the stalls are set up (self-imposed measures). I will further discuss these spatial and temporal aspects in the following section.

My definition of informality, as a practice not registered by the state, was a tool to understand, both the myriad informal practices as well notions of the state. Nonetheless, both Sharma and Chaturika have a different relation to informality and their concerns of state and statal controls are different (almost opposite). The point of presenting these cases, was to highlight the plurality of conceptions and conflicting rationalities (Ngwenya and Cirolia, 2020; Watson, 2003). Particular notions of informality from Delhi are neither applicable nor useful elsewhere in the city and definitely not in Colombo or vice versa. My theoretical conception of informality needed to be adjusted and rebuilt for each case, as if what I am calling data (Sharma and Chaturika's understanding) is the theory itself.

If informality is perceived, operationalized, and practised differently by different people in different places, then why do we need universalized understanding of informality? As discussed before, the intent is ethnocentric, so as to make the other (periphery) visible to the self (metropolis), tied on to a narrative that is totalizing. This universal aspiration is the core to what makes informality (as a research field primarily drawing and conceptualizing from the periphery) metropolitan in nature. Adding more southern cases or provincializing its applicability does not help us understand the myriad set of practices that operate informally.

Temporal and spatial dimensions of multiple informalities

In the previous section, we discussed how informality is understood differently and the multitude of proxies that were operationalized in informal praxis. In this section we will move to a more spatial and temporal dimension of informality. I will discuss with two cases. First, Samarathne, who sells *bath* packets in Colombo from a stall less than a kilometre from Chaturika's stall. Second, Shekhar, who sells *momos* (dumplings) within the same upscale Delhi neighbourhood as that of Sharma's vegetable stall.

Samarathne shifted to Colombo in the early 1990s from Ratnapura (a city circa 80 km south-east of Colombo). Samarathne did various odd jobs and around early 2000s decided to start his own business. He bought a second-hand 3-wheeler and decided to vend soft drinks and snacks from it. He had to keep moving the 3-wheeler

to avoid confrontation with the state officials. It was not the vending that irked the police and municipal officials but the duration of the practice, as he explained:

> Selling soft drinks was an acceptable practice [socially] and a profitable business those days. I used to sell mainly soft drinks and short-eats [snacks]. However, if you stand at the same spot the whole day, the police will come and ask you to move. I would stand in front of a school, when the school gets over, it gets crowded and good for business, but at that time the police will say you are causing a nuisance and move me. I was fed up of moving all the time. My 3-wheeler was an eatery [*khaema kade*] not a taxi.

Both for Samarathne and state officials alike, the act of sale in itself was an acceptable practice; however, it is the extent of time (temporality) that deferred. Informality as a practice registered by the state and de-linked from people and places, misses the crucial dimension of time. The manner in which Samarathne described his initial days in vending business outlined the uncertainty built into vending in the city – to keep moving. However, it made economic sense for him to locate in a place (devoid of state's temporal tolerance), or as he put it 'let people come to me than me going to people'.

After a couple of years, an acquaintance, let him park the 3-wheeler in front of his house. The land in front of the main gate is private (alongside it being on a small lane) and thus Samarathne was never asked to move. Samarathne explained the expansion of his vending business after he had a fixed location. He pointed to two main factors to this betterment. First, as he was now on a private property, state officials did not ask him to keep moving, relieving him to focus on his business. Second, his fixed location has helped him build a reputation, regarding the quality of food he sells. For Samarathne, the location of his parked 3-wheeler (on a private land) assured that he did not need (anymore) to negotiate with the state officials to proceed with the vending business. However, the informality of the business (as not registered) is independent of land ownership, e.g., restaurants running out of private properties have to be registered. These relationships will become clearer when we discuss with Shekar below.

Shekar moved to Delhi from Nepal in 2018, following his uncle. His uncle produces *momos* and provides them to various stalls across Delhi, including few of his own vending spots. When Shekar came to Delhi, his uncle offered him a monthly salary, in leu of which, he would run one of his stalls located in a South Delhi neighbourhood. Shekhar runs this vending stall in two locations. At around 2:00 PM he sets up the stall outside the upscale neighbourhood, along the main commercial street, catering to many who visit this commercial area. However, at around 4:00 PM he moves to a location inside the neighbourhood, on a small lane away from the commercial street, where he sells *momos* until around 9:00 PM. The main commercial street of this neighbourhood has many restaurants and bars which gets much more active after 5:00 PM. On being asked about this shift in location, Shekhar explained:

> My uncle used to do like this so I also do it. Before 5:00 PM there are not many people on the main [commercial] road, but enough people for me to make sales. No one bothers me during this time. After 5:00 PM people starts pouring in, there is traffic jam, many more police personals come to regulate the road. It is useless tension [mental bothering] to stay here after 4:00 PM. So I go inside, setup calmly, and usually the nearby residents buy *momos* from me. This way you escape the police and yet profit from few hours at the main road.

Shekhar's adaptation to time and change of access to a vending spot, resonates with Sharma's description (in the introduction) of how the city is not open during his vegetable vending time, thus not needing an authorization by the state. Furthermore, in both the cases of Samarathne and Shekhar, the spatiality and its temporal change (when and where) in meaning, is a strong determinant of which informal practice becomes acceptable (both to the state and the practitioners). Furthermore, the notion of time, as a period of stagnant vending for Samarathne is in contrast with that of Shekhar. For Shekhar time is divided into accessible and non-accessible periods, which determined his choice of vending spots.

The multifaceted temporal and spatial dimensions of informality presented in this section are subjective and cannot be universalized, although parallels could be identified elsewhere. The conceptualization of acceptable practices or even the need to be registered (conversion to a formal practice) is varied within cities as well as

across the kind of vending being practised. In the previous section, we discussed how the proxies used to understand formality and informality are different for both Sharma (e.g., vending time, *sattvic* food) and Chaturika (e.g., health certificate, *gedara khaema*). In this section, I juxtaposed Samarathne and Shekhar to further highlight similar contradictions in conception of time and space (within the narrow purview of street food vending).

I do not intend to showcase how the cases from the periphery enrich the notion of informality, for it does not. The more cases I present, the more problematized informality gets. The more cases we discuss, the more there will be left to discuss yet further. This infinite loop continues based on the assumption that at some point we will be able to create a global (or globally relevant) understanding of urban informality, a metropolitan concern. The practice of say, Shekhar presents a specific manifestation of urban life, highlighted by the same spot offering different conditions at different points of time. These conditions are specific to Shekhar and would not manifest similarly to others using this space. The empirical cases of say Shekhar does add value to understanding of practices by say Samarathne and together they point to the futility of the global, nonetheless, questions the objective position of urban theory.

Conclusion

If Eurocentrism is about perpetrating knowledge as objective, then its counter need to be highlighting knowledge's subjective nature. This highlighting need not be to make a global urban theory, but to break the global aspirations, that emerge from the colonial episteme. The article discussed multifaceted understandings, contradictions, mobilizations, and spatial-temporal nuances of informality. It used informality (studies) as a means to investigate knowledge hegemony. The intent of cases discussed in the article was not just to illustrate the plurality of informality as a concept, but to highlight how the global (or globally relevant) aim is counterproductive to the aim of dislocating urban theory. Drawing from more cases (even from lesser studied locations) only pluralizes a theory that is based in the metropolis, rather than dislocate it. Using informality, I have demonstrated that even though the dislocation project accepts plurality of empirics, situatedness of

theory, and power imbalances in production of knowledge, the core aim of being global or globally relevant (located out of the metropolis) is counterproductive to any radical change in geography.

I discussed the empirical data of the article as a means to learn from urban informality. Same cities are different for different users/producers and specifically, what we understand by informality differs, thus the proposition to learn *from* informality rather than *about* informality. Understanding of the practices of Mishra, Chaturika, Samarathne, and Shekar have problematized my initial definition of informality as a practice not registered by the state. Further, using southern theory, I highlighted how this (problematized) notion of informality has differential meanings, concerns, and conception by those who practise and research it. This juxtaposition of the researcher's (my) clear definition and practitioner's (their) situated understanding has been done to question the universal/global goals of urban theory and consequently its resonance in the project of dislocating urban theory. This also presents the political notion of south, both beyond north-south (geographical) distinctions and subject-object binaries.

Mignolo (2005: 125), critiquing the universal (uni as singular/one) has proposed a pluralization of the globe/global:

> …there is no safe place within abstract uni-versals of European modernity or its counterpart…Pluri-versality as a universal project shall not be thought out as a new abstract universal but as a connector, a place of encounter and exchange of liberating and decolonizing practices, where it would make sense to fight for the idea that an other world is possible; and that world will be conceived as a world in which many worlds can co-exist.

Mishra, Chaturika, Samarathne, and Shekar, all have their own subjective understanding of informality they are practising, which could, of course, be globalized. However, it is a global(ized) subjective understanding, not a disembodied objective reality. This subjective understanding has value in how the partitioners operate, produce the city, and conceptualize the urban. Plurality of these positions are needed to understand a city or the urban, as a partial snapshot from the subjectivity of the researcher and not as a global urban phenomenon. The aim of

discussing these cases is not to figure a standardized understanding of informality, but to counter the understanding of informality in totality, i.e., to avoid what Banerjee et al. (2015: 42) has warned us against "falling into the trap of either an unqualified universalism or a naïve historicism." To have multiple globes and multiple views of those multiple globe, none of which is objective or global. The cases discussed here learns from informality and showed multiple informalities, which are not applicable in capturing totality of informality in Colombo, Delhi, or elsewhere. It is not globally relevant. The aim to be global (or globally relevant) creates a theory located in the metropolis to understand the world in totality. It should, however, not be understood as a global *outlook*, which acknowledges knowledge production (and hegemonies) that are geographically located in different parts of the globe.

The underlying question that I engage within the paper and still ask at the end, as a means to problematize it further, is: Can the 'dislocated' urban theory be any better, as opposed to metropolitan urban theory, if it is based on the same aspirations of perpetrating itself as global (or globally relevant). Will the global aspirations not make the location of theory situate in the metropolis, yet again? Contesting the 'universal grammar' itself will be useless unless we question and dislocate universal/global aspirations (the aim to be global and not the global outlook), which lies at the core of metropolitan theory.

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[i] Assimilation and appropriations of external influences are not just a European trait, many cultures do that, e.g., *Chai* is a British (colonial) insert. Although merely appropriated, it is perceived as Indian, in and beyond India (even though it exists elsewhere in South Asia). It is the cultural and economic power that Europe (North Atlantic network) commands in the contemporary world, that make assimilations and appropriations a problem.

[ii] Laws that distinguish different castes and outlines the rules for following these categories, restricting social mobility (even denying the flow of knowledge between caste categories).

[iii] *Sattvic* is a categorization of food in Ayurveda (and elsewhere). However, in common usage it means vegetarian (vegetarian here also refers to the exclusion of items like garlic and onion) and 'clean' food. For the purposes of this article, it is important to understand the food being 'clean', derives from, who cooks it. The notion of *sattvic* is evoked by Sharma to denote both that it is vegetarian (and without onion, garlic) but more specifically that he (belonging to the Brahmin caste) has cooked it. There is also a latent meaning that the food has not been handled by someone hailing from a lower caste.