Ambivalent Encounters

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Published by Rutgers University Press


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In January of 2000, when I returned to Banaras to officially begin my fieldwork, I discovered a curious absence. Almost all of the girls whom I had met two years before and who worked on the ghat selling *diyas* (small floating lamps) and postcards were gone. There was a new batch of young girls selling these items, but it was as though the others had been sent into hiding and, as I later found out, in a sense they had been. With a few notable exceptions, by the time the girls reached the age of twelve or thirteen, they were prohibited from working on the riverfront. In an interview with Diraj Sahani, one of the older guides in the neighborhood, I asked him why this was the case, and he provided an explanation that I was to hear countless times throughout the course my research:

> After that, slowly, slowly they become [in English] “young,” and there are a lot of boys on the ghats and they will look at the girls in a bad way and the girl will get the wrong kinds of feelings, so the parents have to stop the girl and say, “You stay at home and do your work, make food, help your mother.” We worry about girls who have become mature (*sayana*) being on the ghats, people will say bad things about her, boys will look at her in the wrong way, they will say she is a girl who wanders around a lot, they will say she is doing some bad business. You see girls are the honor of the house, if something happens to them it is a disgrace for the whole family.

Gender, therefore, played a fundamental role in determining the way the children participated in this informal tourist economy. Girls and boys were not only exposed to different work trajectories but they were also subject to very different spatial constraints and social expectations. While boys were free to guide tourists around the city and participate in the more lucrative enterprise
of commission work (dalali), girls were almost always confined to selling lower-priced items on the riverfront, where their behavior and activities could be monitored by kinsmen and neighbors.¹

The gendered nature of this economy and the different access that girls and boys had to various spaces in the city resonate with many of the observations made by the anthropologist Nita Kumar. Kumar argues that gender plays the most decisive role in influencing the way that space is structured, imagined, and experienced by children in Banaras. As she observes: “the most crucial lines of division within a class called children are between girls and boys: girls privilege the home, boys the neighborhood; girls know they have more than one home, boys that they will forever wander. Their personas, and their lives, as male and female, are shaped by the spaces they find themselves in, the spaces as they read and live them, and the spaces they anticipate” (Kumar 2007, 239). Following Henrietta Moore, Kumar is interested in how spatial relations both “represent and reproduce social relations.” She examines how adults use space in their attempts to discipline and socialize children along gendered lines. However, she also notes that the question remains as to “how children reappropriate space” and use tactics both overt and clandestine “to escape the nets of disciplining” (246).

In this chapter, I take up this question and I introduce some of the children who worked on and near Dasashwamedh Ghat during the time of my fieldwork. I discuss the different ways that girls and boys negotiated the riverfront and participated in this informal economy. Although their accounts resonate with many of Kumar’s ethnographic findings, they also diverge from them in interesting ways. Most notably, they highlight the prominent role that class, caste, and neighborhood affiliation played in configuring the children’s experiences.

**So Long as They Are Children**

Like Diraj, numerous anthropologists have noted the relative freedoms afforded to prepubescent girls in India and the increasing restrictions that are placed upon them as they approach sexual maturity. As Leela Dube has observed, “Pre-pubertal girls can generally play with boys and other girls on streets and in parks, courtyards, and other open spaces.” Moreover, in “poorer sections of the population,” they often work outside of the home. However, with the onset of puberty girls are usually withdrawn from the labor market and prohibited from playing with boys in public spaces (Dube 2001, 108). Sylvia Vatuk suggests that this is because in Hindu India, “concern about how daughters turn out (nikalna) centers upon neither their earning potential nor their filial devotion but rather upon their sexual purity.”² “In most cases,” Vatuk concludes, the purity of girls is preserved by imposing “strict restraints on their freedom of movement and by close supervision of their associations and activities” (Vatuk 1990, 77).³ Such
was the case with the girls who worked in this informal tourist economy. So long as the girls were still considered children (which, is also to say, so long as they were viewed as asexual subjects), their work and presence on the riverfront were socially tolerated.\textsuperscript{4}

And yet, while the girls on the ghats were not confined by the stringent norms and proscriptions of female adolescent life, they still lived in anticipation of them. Their understandings of self, of proper female decorum, and even their imaginings of what constituted a desirable life for the future were heavily shaped by pervasive gender norms and expectations that repeatedly cast the good woman as a modest, self-sacrificing, domestic caretaker.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, although the girls were “free” to work on the riverfront, and certainly enjoyed having the opportunity to play there, I also sensed that they felt stigmatized by their work in this highly public, male-dominated sphere. As I will discuss below, their attempts to manage and ameliorate this stigma surfaced in both subtle and overt ways.

**Troubles at Home and the Virtue of Necessity**

One of the more obvious ways the girls attempted to ameliorate this stigma was by “making a virtue” out of their necessity to work (Bourdieu 1980, 54). Another, related, strategy involved continually demonstrating that necessity was precisely what rendered their work on the riverfront virtuous. All of the girls who I came to know throughout the course of my research told me that they worked on the riverfront because there were “troubles at home.” “Troubles at home” emerged as an organizing narrative that provided these girls with a way to explain, legitimate, and valorize their participation in this informal economy. The following account of Malika Sahani provides one such example.

**Malika**

In 1997 I met Malika Sahani. She was almost eleven years old at the time and the only girl I had seen selling postcards on the ghats. The first time I saw her I did a double-take, for unlike all of the other young girls whom I had encountered in the city, Malika was dressed in boys’ clothes. Instead of the usual frilly dress and sandals, or the neatly pressed salwar kamiz, Malika stood before me wearing polyester trousers, a striped collared t-shirt, and a pair of oversized sneakers. Had there not been such an incredibly beautiful and delicate face underneath her tightly drawn pigtails, I probably would have mistaken her for a boy.

Malika’s striking looks, her intelligence, and her polite demeanor made her one of the most successful children selling postcards on the ghats. After a few years of working on the riverfront, she had accumulated a considerable following of Western tourists who regularly kept in touch with her. Many of them sent
her money and gifts, and one tourist had even purchased a boat for her father. Based on the letters I read, all of these “foreign friends” seemed extremely eager to help alleviate the financial stress that plagued Malika and her family.

About three years before I met Malika, her father, who was working as a house painter, fell from a ladder during an intoxicated episode and severely broke his leg. The injury left him bedridden and unemployed for almost a year, and it left his wife Sharmila frantic about how she was going to provide for Malika and their three younger daughters, Ritthi, Jaira, and Seenu. Up until that point, Sharmila had never worked outside the home, but in the wake of the accident she decided to set up a small stand on the riverfront and began to sell garlands and incense to pilgrims. Inspired by her mother’s courage and resourcefulness, Malika decided that she would also take to the ghats and begin selling postcards to foreign tourists.

By her own account, and that of many others in the neighborhood, Malika was the first girl at Dasashwamedh to sell postcards to foreign tourists, and one of the only girls to eventually do some guiding. When I returned to Banaras to begin my fieldwork, Malika was fourteen. She had already retired from working on the ghats and was going to school full time, but her two younger sisters, Ritthi and Jaira, had picked up where she left off. Occasionally, Malika would come to the riverfront to bring food for her sisters and mother, but when she wasn’t at school she spent most of her day in the tiny, dark room that served as home for her and her family.

I first visited Malika’s home on a wintry Saturday morning in 1998. I was happy to be off from language school for the day and was taking one of my usual strolls along the river’s edge when I slipped and fell into the Ganga. By the time I awkwardly made my out of the muddy water and back onto the ghat, I was soaked and humiliated. Malika and her mother had been sitting above at their garland stand and had witnessed my fall. When they saw the pathetic state I was in, Sharmila quickly instructed Malika to take me to their house and give me a change of clothes. I was grateful for their kindness, and the incident emerged as a turning point in my relationship with Malika and her family. Thereafter, I became a frequent visitor.

Malika and I would spend hours chatting over tea and papadam, or while she prepared meals for her parents and sisters. We would also go to the movies together, and have lengthy discussions about Bollywood heroes and lifestyles, and how they differed from the world that Malika knew. It was through such informal gatherings and conversations that I really came to know Malika. However, before I left Banaras at the end of my fieldwork, I asked Malika if she would be willing to give me the “official” narrative of why and how she had begun working on the riverfront. “It’s for the book,” I kept urging her. She agreed. On an October afternoon, Malika and I sat on the floor of their dark blue rectangular room and she recounted her story:
MS: Well, earlier everything was okay at home, earlier my mother used to stay at home and Papa used to work, he used to work as a painter. At that time we didn’t have a boat. My father drinks a bit. One day he broke his leg because of his drinking habit and no one in my neighborhood or among my relatives helped us. If anyone had stood by us at that time and helped us out financially then we would not have stepped outside the home but at that time neither those whom we called our kinsman helped us, nor anyone else. Even my grandfather and my uncles and my brothers did not help us. That is why we decided that we ought to do something to save our family and at the same time something that would not give us a bad name.

JH: So how old were you then?

MS: At that time I was about eight years old.

When Malika described the troubles that had brought her to the ghats, she referenced more than just her weak father, his crippling accident, and his drinking habit. According to Malika, she and her mother were forced into this situation because the people who traditionally should have come to their aid, that is, their neighbors and extended family, did not. In this regard, Malika understood her entry into this informal tourist economy as being directly linked to the erosion of key social relations and obligations. Her presence on the ghats bespoke a fractured “familial self” (Cohen 1998, 105). Moreover, adding insult to injury, Malika had to endure criticisms and ridicule from her relatives when she first began working on the ghats, and she described the anguish that her decision had initially caused her mother:

The first day, after I got the postcards I went straight to my mother’s shop and told her that I was going to sell them so my mother began to cry, she said, “If your father didn’t have a broken leg then maybe you wouldn’t have to do this.” So I said, “There is nothing wrong with doing this if I have no choice, if I am doing this it is good because at least you will get some help in running the family, simply because I am a girl doesn’t mean that I should stay at home and feel embarrassed.” Well, one should have a sense of shame but not to the extent that most girls have. You see, some people work because it is their hobby (shauk) and others work because they have no choice (mazburi mein kam karte hain). I didn’t do this as a hobby, I did this because there were troubles at home.

For Malika, therefore, the emphasis on necessity provided her with a way to render her work on the riverfront legitimate and virtuous rather than shameful and transgressive. Furthermore, it enabled her to indict those kinsmen who had failed to live up to their responsibilities.

In the course of listening to these entry narratives, one of the things I found interesting about Malika, and many of the other girls I came to know, was the
way they walked and talked a very fine line between critiquing gender norms and notions of femininity, and reinscribing them.\(^8\) For instance, as Malika pointed out, while an overbearing sense of shame and modesty could be detrimental to girls’ earning ability, it was also a quality they needed to possess if they were going to maintain a good reputation while working on the ghats. By working on the riverfront, these girls actively appropriated a space that was dominated by men and, as Malika pointed out, they challenged the idea that girls should be limited to the home. However, by continually emphasizing that they “had no choice,” the girls also reinstated the home as the truly legitimate sphere for them to operate in. In fact, the girls on the ghats often spoke very critically of “girls from rich families” who worked in “offices,” “mingled with boys,” and “neglected their families” so that they could pursue their own personal interests and “hobbies.” For the girls on the ghats, work was not regarded as a means for the cultivation of individual skills, talents, or interests but, rather, it was an act of necessity that one took on in their efforts to serve and support the family.

Again, this is not to suggest that the girls derived no personal pleasures or benefits from working on the riverfront. They clearly enjoyed being able to socialize with their friends, and some of them hoped that they would be able to divert part of their earnings toward their own personal consumption and pleasures. But such perks could not be represented as ends in themselves. Establishing and proving their compulsion to work, therefore, became a kind of ongoing labor for the girls, and if someone was perceived as trying to challenge their legitimacy the girls responded swiftly.\(^9\)

For example, in the late afternoon, before it became dark and the crowd assembled for the evening puja, the girls would gather together on the lower steps of the ghat near the river. They would drink tea, share snacks, play marbles or other games, and sometimes they even took a boat out for a spirited sing-along row. Often, I joined them. I would watch and listen as they played together and gossiped about various happenings and people on the ghats. Over time, I began paying closer attention to the run-ins that occurred between these girls and some of the boys who worked and played on the ghats. While the girls were usually fairly successful at sequestering play spaces for themselves, they were also alert to the presence of young male intruders, who would occasionally interrupt their fun with a slew of obnoxious comments. The boys would tease the girls by saying that they were doing this work to “get money for their marriages,” pointing out that “the girls in the boatman caste are married very quickly.” Or, they would accuse the girls of working so they could buy jewelry and makeup. “Look,” the boys would say to me, “they have no shame, they are wearing rings (dekhiye unko koi sharam nahin hai, anguthiyan paheni hain)!” Some of the boys even reprimanded the girls for “begging” tourists for cream, hairpins, and mirrors. This charge was particularly offensive to the girls, even though
they wielded it among themselves in their efforts to ensure that an appropriate physical presentation was being maintained. The girls often reprimanded each other by saying: “Don’t tie that gamecha (cloth) around your waist, it makes you look like a beggar.” “Don’t hold your hand out that way when you take the money from your customers, it makes you look like a beggar.”

Interestingly, while the girls clearly resented the boys’ taunting, they usually did not fire back with insults of their own. “If you start insulting these boys on the ghats, they will just respond with even dirtier things to say,” Basanti Sahani (age eleven) informed me. Instead, when such incidents did occur, the girls would quickly remind their assailants that they were doing this work because of troubles at home; a sick mother, an unemployed father, a family member who needed an operation. As was the case with Malika, they also frequently turned the tables on their critics: “Will you give me money for my family’s expenses if I don’t sell diyas? Will you give me food? Will you fix the problems in my home?” Though these run-ins were a source of aggravation, they also provided the girls with a valuable public opportunity to reassert their necessity to work and thereby reestablish their legitimacy on the riverfront.

**Domesticating the Ghats**

Another strategy the girls relied upon to ameliorate the stigma associated with their work involved domesticating the ghats. By this, I am referring to the girls’ repeated efforts to cast the ghats as a virtual extension of the home; a friendly and familial space, where nurturing and protective kinsmen were on hand to ensure their safety and see to it that they were treated appropriately by others. By relying on this strategy, the girls sought not to “escape” the adult “nets of disciplining” and supervision, as Kumar puts it, but rather, to productively deploy them. Malika’s account, again, provides an example.

Although Malika explained that she was forced to work on the riverfront because of negligent relatives, when it came to discussing her actual presence on the ghats, she too was quick to emphasize that she was always surrounded by a watchful web of friends and family. For instance, in describing what it was like to be the only girl selling postcards at Dasashwamedh, she remarked: “I never had any fear inside of me, I never felt afraid because there were some people there who I knew. For example, my uncle, people who I knew very well, so since they were there I didn’t feel afraid. Of course I felt a little bit scared but not too much. I told myself, ‘If I won’t have anything to do with anyone, then why would anyone bother me?’”

The presence of known family and friends did not automatically, or always, protect these girls from being harassed or teased by boys. And certainly, many of the girls were quite eager if not fond of assailing the boys’ reputations and
emphasizing how “rude” and “dirty” they were. However, this did not prevent
the girls from continually pointing out that in comparison to other alternatives,
such as working in an office, or even in someone’s home as a domestic servant,
the ghats were a good place for them to work; perhaps, even safer and more
respectable. Anjali Srivastav provides another vivid example of this.

Anjali
At the time of my research, Anjali was fourteen and her two younger sisters,
Mona and Gulab, were ages nine and seven. They would arrive at the ghat every
morning to sell tea. After several hours of selling they would go home to bathe,
eat, and tend to their household chores. In the late afternoon, they would return
to the ghats and continue selling until the evening puja had finished. Their par-
ents’ tea stall was located about ten minutes beyond the Godolia crossing near
the edge of the Chowk market. Despite its central location, business there was
slow, so Anjali’s parents equipped the girls with a large metal kettle and a sup-
ply of plastic cups and instructed the girls to look for customers on the ghats.
On an average day, the girls earned between fifty and seventy-five rupees. Their
brother, Maneesh, who was twelve, also used to accompany them, but a few
months into my research he got a job cleaning the floors in a nearby photo lab,
and his appearances on the ghat became less frequent. Their youngest brother
Dinku, who was five, also occasionally accompanied the girls, but most of the
time, he remained in the marketplace with his parents.

I first met the Srivastav children in the winter of 2000. Anjali reminded me
of Malika, because she too was dressed in boy’s clothes, had a strikingly beauti-
ful face, and was sharp as a tack. The first time I met her I was sitting on the
ghat with a friend of mine. When she overheard me speaking in Hindi she came
over, and with one hand grasping her kettle and the other hand placed on her
hip she asked, “Are you one of those foreigners who have come here to help poor
children, the ones who take the children over to the other side of the river to
swim and wash their hair in the afternoon?”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but the friend whom I was speak-
ing with told me that Anjali was referring to the Back to Life Program, which, as
he explained, was started by a group of Westerners who had come to Banaras to
help poor children on the ghat with their schooling and medical needs. Some-
times in the afternoons the volunteers would load the children into a boat,
take them to the other side of the river, watch the kids swim around, delouse
them with a stringent shampoo, and then give them a snack as they rowed them
back over to the city. Anjali and her sisters had heard about these excursions
and wanted to go. They were disappointed when they found out that I was not
involved in organizing such outings.

After this encounter, however, the girls and I became friendly and we
started meeting on a regular basis. I also got to know Anjali’s parents and paid
many visits to their home. After a few months, they agreed to let Anjali serve as my “tutor.” She was going to help me learn about “Indian culture,” and more specifically, what it was like to be a girl working on the ghats. In the afternoon, when she had free time, Anjali would come visit me at my guest house and we would turn on the tape recorder and basically chat. The topics varied: family, friends, religion, work, and love. The latter was one of Anjali’s favorite topics since she and a young boy on the ghat had recently developed a romantic interest in each other and had begun passing love letters back and forth.

Anjali told me that she had started selling tea six years before in order to help her parents pay for an operation for her paternal grandfather. At first she only sold tea near her parent’s stand in the marketplace, but when business became slow she and her sisters began coming to the ghats. “In the beginning I used to feel shy,” she recounted. “I just felt in my heart, ‘what will it be like to sell tea on the ghats?’ Then gradually after being there for some time I began to like it. People started to recognize me and speak to me, before that no one used to speak to me.”

From what I could tell through our conversations and from what I observed when Anjali was on the riverfront, Anjali did, for the most part, enjoy her work. She was an extremely gregarious and curious person, and she seemed to delight in the buzz and bustle of life on the ghats. She also said that she enjoyed having the chance to meet and speak with foreigners. Like Malika, she too had a large collection of letters and photos that tourists had sent to her over the years, and many stories about “the nice customers” whom she had befriended. Moreover, like Malika, Anjali also felt that it was important for her to try and help her parents financially, and she often pointed out that if she had been born a boy, she would have been able to do much more to support them. “My regret,” she told me one afternoon, “is that I am a girl and all I can do is sell tea, I can’t do any other work because I won’t get a job in a shop.” When I asked her why she wouldn’t be able to work in a shop, she responded:

AS: Because it is not a good thing to work alongside boys, people are different from each other, some are good, some are bad and you can only find out about them after working with them for some time. All the girls, I mean girls from big [rich] families, who work in offices, they find that the men there are not good. Because they make taunting comments, they are dirty type of people.

JH: What does dirty mean?

AS: A dirty (ganda) type. [Starts making chi chi chi noises and is reluctant to answer].

JH: You mean bad manners? Do you mean that they misbehave with girls?

AS: They misbehave with girls, they tease and molest girls, meaning they touch their bodies, all this stuff.
JH: So these kinds of things never happen with you on the ghats? The boys don’t bother you?

AS: They treat me like their kid sister and they joke and kid with me. Nothing more than that.

Interestingly, Anjali’s explanation circumvented the primary obstacles that stood in her way of getting a well-paying shop or office job, such as the fact that she came from a poor family and had little education. Like many of the other girls who worked on the ghats, however, Anjaliredeemed her class position and her limited work options by reading it as an indication of moral superiority. The children on the ghats had a very well developed set of ideas for explaining and characterizing the differences between the rich and poor, and stereotypes of these two classes of people were constantly being invoked by the children as they attempted to understand their positions in relation to their larger society. For most of these children, rich people (amir log), were regard as “unmannered,” “selfish,” “spoiled,” and more corrupted by influences from the West. However, poor people, such as themselves, were seen as the upholders of traditional values and virtues and, as Anjali and Malika constantly reminded me, they were inherently more “kind” and “polite.” Moreover, like Malika, Anjali also attempted to portray the riverfront as a safer and more respectable place to work. In contrast to the daughters from “big families,” who had to defend against lascivious predators in the officeplace, on the ghats Anjali was the recipient of brotherly love and protection.

And yet, although Anjali clung to the idea of being treated as a little sister, according to most people in the neighborhood, she was far past the age to be working on the riverfront and joking around with boys and men, who, in actuality, had no kinship ties to her.44 As I will discuss in later chapters, some saw her situation as heartbreaking, and pitied her for having “greedy” parents who seemed to care more about money than their daughter’s well-being or reputation. Others, however, had less sympathy, and interpreted Anjali’s attempts to create playful relations with boys and men on the riverfront as a sign that she herself had not been properly “domesticated.”

Spaces of Reflection

The girls’ attempts to represent their experiences and identities in more socially acceptable ways, did not, therefore, go unchallenged. However, there were also instances when encounters with tourists and locals could prompt the girls to reconsider, rather than defend, the usual narratives they relied upon. In the terms of George Herbert Mead, they provided these girls with an opportunity to reflect upon their situations through the eyes of the Other, and in so doing, reach a potentially revised understanding of their experiences and selves (Mead 1934). The following accounts of Jaila and Priya put this on display.
Jaila

Jaila Sahani was one of Malika’s three younger sisters. At the time of my fieldwork she was eight years old, and she was working every day selling postcards and diyas on the ghats. While Jaila was adept at attracting customers and earned a fair amount of money for her family, she was not as successful or popular as Malika had been. Jaila was hot-tempered and lacked the diplomatic skill that had made Malika so well regarded by both tourists and her peers. Like Malika, Jaila also continually emphasized that she was doing this work because of troubles at home. However, unlike her older sister, Jaila was less inclined to cast these troubles as the product of an unsupportive extended family and more apt to point the finger at their alcoholic father.

For instance, one morning I found Jaila on the ghats crying because her father had taken the money she had saved to go on an overnight boating excursion with several other families in the neighborhood. Jaila had been looking forward to the trip for weeks, and had persuaded me to go along with them. When I met her on the ghats the morning of our departure, however, all of her excitement had disappeared. She was sitting with her head in her hands, while tears rolled down her face and gathered around her ankles. Through muffled cries she told me how her father had confiscated her money, pointing out that it was something he had done many times before. Then she turned and looked at me and said, “Jenny Didi, don’t you think it is wrong for a father to take his daughter’s money for liquor?” “Yes,” I emphatically replied. Sensing my sympathy, Jaila asked if I would loan her fifty rupees for the trip. I agreed, and as soon as I handed her the money she quickly raced off to buy some biscuits and namkeen to take with us.

Jaila was certainly savvy enough to use her father’s drinking problem as a way of garnering sympathy and financial support from me, as well as from other tourists whom she befriended. However, in sharing these stories, Jaila also seemed to be looking for an audience to validate her indictments. Her complaints about her father often took the form of a question, as though she was uncertain about their very legitimacy, let alone the propriety of voicing them. By sharing such grievances with me and other tourists, Jaila, I think, received the confirmation she was looking for. She also discovered an avenue for expressing feelings and criticisms that she was more reluctant to articulate among her friends, family, and neighbors.

Although Jaila was reluctant to criticize her father when she was with the other children on the ghats, the children did not hesitate to call attention to his shortcomings. For instance, on another occasion, Jaila and I were talking on the ghat when Jay Yadav, a twelve-year-old boy who peddled postcards, came over to join us. He looked at Jaila disapprovingly and shook his head in dismay. “It is wrong that your father always puts you out to work here,” he said. “Look how
skinny you are becoming, your health is going bad!” Jaila cracked an uncom-
fortable smile while Jay asked me if young girls like Jaila worked outside the
home in America. “Not usually,” I replied. Jaila’s eyes widened with surprise,
“You mean they don’t have to work?” she asked. “They just go to school?” I nod-
ded and watched as Jaila retreated into a contemplative silence.

Though I can only speculate here, my sense is that Jaila was not so much
surprised by my answer as she was by the experience of momentarily stepping
outside of herself and reflecting upon her life from another perspective. Like the
other girls on the ghats, Jaila was very aware that there were many children who
“just” went to school and who had parents who provided for all of their needs.
Again, the differences between children who came from “big” or “good” families
and the children who worked on the ghats was a popular topic of conversation,
and it often led to a series of “us” versus “them” contrasts. However, what trans-
pired in this exchange was of a different ilk. Jay’s penetrating criticisms had
the effect of disrupting, or least questioning, the inevitability of this opposition
between “us” and “them,” and in so doing, I think, he jolted Jaila into a powerful
moment of self-reflection. As Jaila sat silently thumbing through her postcards,
I sensed that perhaps she was considering what her life would be like if she did
not have to sell them.

Priya

Priya Srivastav, age eight, also sold postcards on the ghats, and like Jaila, many
of her troubles stemmed from an alcoholic father. At the time of my fieldwork
she was one of the most successful postcard peddlers on the ghat. However,
unlike some of the other children, her success did not derive from her abilities
to charm and endear herself to foreign tourists. In fact, tourists often described
her as one of the most “relentless” and “aggravating” children on the riverfront.
Priya’s success stemmed from the long hours she put in and the strict discipline
that was imposed upon her by her father, who also worked on the ghats selling
peanuts. Priya would wake up at five in the morning and come to the ghats in
order to catch “the sunrise tourists” who were heading out on boating excur-
sions. She would stay on the ghats until nine and then go home to bathe and
eat a meal. Around eleven, she would return with a fresh supply of postcards
and remain on the ghats for most of the day, returning home with her father
after the evening puja. Though she had expressed an interest in school, she told
me that her father had forbidden her to attend because he wanted her to sell
postcards. “If I don’t sell,” she frequently reminded me, “then how will we eat?”

Unlike Jaila, who was allowed to save some money for herself, Priya’s father
kept virtually all of his daughter’s earnings, and he kept a close account of how
much she made. If he wasn’t satisfied with her sales for the day he would openly
scold her, and according to Priya, sometimes he would hit her when they went
home. If he saw Priya playing with the other girls on the ghat he would often curse at them and order Priya to get back to work. Most of the time, Priya seemed resigned to his overbearing presence, but there were also days when she was clearly fed up, and her eyes would well up with frustration and despair as she reluctantly left playing with her friends to obey her father’s orders. When Priya’s father would unload his slurred tirades at the children they usually responded with mocking laughter, and many of the young boys would fire back with insults.

One evening in March, I was sitting on the ghat having tea with Pramod Sahani while we waited for the evening puja to begin. Pramod was also twelve years old at the time (about to turn thirteen) and worked as a peddler and guide at Dasashwamedh. Of all the children I came to know, he was definitely the most charismatic and feisty, and it served him very well in business. He never backed down if older boys gave him a difficult time or if young men from outside the neighborhood tried to interfere with his customers. As Pramod and I were drinking our tea, Priya and her father were making their way to the crowd that had gathered for the puja. Priya was a few yards ahead and was carrying her postcards while her father stumbled behind her. His hair was disheveled and his button-down shirt and long blue *dhoti* were wrinkled and stained. When Priya’s father passed by, Pramod suddenly jumped up and began yelling at him. “You are a drunk, you are no good! You drink your daughter’s money! You are ruining her life! You have her out here working on the ghats and you are just a drunk!”

Priya’s father was caught off guard but when he finally realized that the remarks were directed at him, he wobbled toward Pramod and stepped out of his *chapal* (sandal), raising it in the air as though he were going to strike. Pramod quickly darted out of his reach and began to skirt around him, wielding more insults. Priya looked back with a nervous smile on her face and watched the banter between them. After a few minutes, Pramod stopped his taunting and sat back down, and Priya’s father shuffled off. The onlookers who had gathered to watch the assault departed. “Why did you do that?” I asked. Pramod looked at me as though I were an idiot, and angrily replied, “Because he is a useless drunk, he puts his daughter out to work on the ghats, and spends all of the money she earns on booze. Why should I respect such a man?”

For boys like Pramod and Jay, these fathers were weak and pathetic men who seemed to be sacrificing their daughters to fuel their own addictions, and as such, they were regarded as suitable targets for teasing and abuse even though their seniority should have commanded deference and respect. However, the point I want to emphasize here is that these kinds of public incidents and indictments also, I suggest, affected the way that girls like Priya and Jaiya understood their presence on the riverfront. They provided another opportunity, though not necessarily a welcome one, for the girls to compare their own perceptions of their lives and situations against the record of public opinion. Confronted with such
forceful criticisms of their parents, and particularly their alcoholic fathers, the girls were, I think, led to ponder why exactly they were working on the riverfront. Was it really about providing food for the family, as Priya so often reminded me? Or, was it about accommodating a father’s habitual thirst?

A Play Space

In addition to these kinds of encounters, there were other ways in which the ghats provided the girls with a space for reflecting upon their lives, and even “playing” with their reality (Winnicott 1989). Indeed, often it was through play that the girls experimented with alternative identities and roles for themselves. Notably, these were roles that frequently challenged their subordinate positions as lower-class and lower-caste young female subjects. For instance, one of the games I repeatedly observed was “playing puja.” The girls had purchased a small Shiva lingam, and sometimes in the late afternoon they would gather at the bottom of the steps and construct a shrine out of mud. They would bring flowers to garland the shrine, light incense, chant “mantras,” and then at the conclusion of the ceremony they would distribute prasad (food offerings). The girls especially delighted in getting to play the “panditji.” One afternoon in October, as I was walking along the ghats, the girls summoned me over to participate in the ceremony. Anita Sahani, who sold diyas, and was well liked by the other girls for her exuberant personality and great sense of humor, was presiding as the priest. “Jenny Didi,” she said in a commanding voice, “you sit here, and we will give you prasad when we are done.” I quickly complied and Anita continued reciting the mantras. The other girls seemed to be listening intently. Before we got to the distribution of the prasad, however, we were interrupted by several people passing by. They all made similar comments. “Anita,” they chided, “how can you possibly be the panditji? You eat chicken and fish!”

According to the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who spent much of his career studying and theorizing children’s play, these interruptions should have been a deal breaker. For the play space, he argued, cannot “easily admit intrusions” (Winnicott 1989, 51). The play space is maintained by never challenging its reality; by never posing such a question: “How could you possibly be the panditji?” Anita, however, did not seem to be distressed or discouraged by the interruptions. In fact, she responded by closing her eyes and calmly waving her hand in the air, making circular motions as though she were deflecting the remarks away from her and the other girls. Then, after several more minutes of officiating, she finally distributed the prasad.

Through such play, these girls were able to carve out a semi-autonomous space on the ghats where they could escape the demands of everyday life and imaginatively create alternative realities and roles for themselves. However,
the fact that their play often involved challenging, if not inverting, established social hierarchies and roles, also suggests that the girls used play as a way to engage and critique their social reality. Moreover, this incident, as well as many others that I witnessed, makes it clear that class and caste were indeed dominating issues on the riverfront. Remarks about “eating chicken and fish,” “begging from tourists,” or having to work so that they “could earn money and marry early,” were not just arbitrary forms of teasing; rather such comments were wielded to remind these girls of their position in society.

Reflecting on Tourists

Whether it was through play or by valorizing their poverty and virtue, the girls found their own ways of challenging established social hierarchies and asserting their monopoly on moral propriety. Another way they did this was by criticizing Western tourists. One of their favorite targets included the foreign women who wandered around “half naked,” “showing their bodies.” In fact, commenting on the appalling apparel of female tourists seemed to be a favorite pastime for the girls. There were many afternoons when I joined the girls for tea on the ghats, and watched and listened as they sat in groups and berated these visitors. What began as lighthearted ridicule often escalated into expressions of palpable scorn. As Sangeeta remarked one day, “I want to hit those women for wearing those clothes!” The other girls present quickly expressed their agreement, “Yes, look at those foreign women and their dirty clothes! They have no shame! They are showing their bodies!” Such commentary usually led the girls to speculate further about the “sexcapades” of these female visitors and their inappropriate romantic trysts with fellow travelers and older guides and boatmen on the riverfront.

The girls also expressed more general grievances about the “rude” and insulting behavior that tourists exhibited when they were trying to sell their products. As Mona remarked to me one day, “Don’t they understand that it is our job to ask? Today an English man knocked my cups out of my hand when I asked him if he wanted some tea and he yelled at me to go away. These tourists are very bad, they have no manners!” Jaila and Priya, who were sitting beside me as Mona recounted the episode also chimed in with their own examples. Priya began talking about all the times tourists had thrown her postcards on the ground when she was trying to sell them, and Jaila began mimicking the way that tourists constantly shooed her away at the evening puja when she approached carrying a basket of diyas.

Finally, some of the girls criticized tourists for overstepping their boundaries. For instance, Malika told me about a French tourist in his late forties named Gilbert whom she had met while she was selling postcards on the ghats. During his stay in Banaras, Gilbert would come to the ghats every day to talk
with Malika. As Malika recounted: “One day he came when I was talking with my uncle. When we finished our conversation Gilbert called me over and said ‘Malika don’t talk to that man! You should not talk to Indian men, they cannot be trusted!’ I was thinking to myself, ‘What an idiot this man is; I am Indian too! And he doesn’t even realize that this is my uncle!’”

In Gilbert’s case, Malika’s grievances went beyond his rude remarks about India and Indians. Malika told me that when Gilbert returned to France he began sending her “love letters.” Initially, I thought Malika was using the term inappropriately, but when she showed me the letters I realized that she did have a good understanding of the genre. Gilbert had decorated the envelopes with magazine pictures of couples kissing and embracing, and one of them featured a woman sitting on a man’s lap with her legs wrapped around him. The invitations to “come stay” and Gilbert’s repeated declarations of his “love” for Malika definitely diverged from the paternal and maternal sentiments that usually animated tourists’ letters. And, even though Malika could not read the letters on her own, she was able to sense this. Upon receiving the letters, Malika actually hid them from her mother, fearing that they would cause her distress and lead her to forbid Malika from continuing her work on the riverfront.

Tourists like Gilbert were an anomaly. With one or two exceptions, I feel confident in saying that most Western tourists were not sexually interested in these children. However, stories about child prostitution in India were pervasive and, as such, tourists often asked me if these children were “at risk” by doing this work. Indeed, one of the things that interested me was the very different ways that Western tourists and people in Banaras perceived these “risks.” For many Western tourists, the fact that these girls were children provoked extreme anxiety. Tourists assumed that because they were young they would be more vulnerable, and they repeatedly expressed fears that they would be molested by foreign visitors. However, for many people in Dasashwamedh, it was precisely the opposite. So long as these girls were children it was considered acceptable, even though not desirable, for them to work on the riverfront. Moreover, the potential risks these girls faced were not so much associated with foreign tourists as they were with local boys. As Diraj noted at the outset of this chapter, working on the riverfront became more problematic once these girls got older and the boys on the ghats began looking at them “in the wrong way.”

**Removed from the Riverfront**

By the time the girls reached the ages of twelve or thirteen, therefore, they were usually reeled back into the domestic sphere. At home their bodies, behaviors, and reputations could be carefully monitored and safeguarded, and more time could be devoted to properly training them for their future roles as
daughters-in-law. For the girls, then, the passage from childhood to adolescence was marked by a radical withdrawal from public space, thus ensuring that every couple of years a new group of girls would emerge on the ghats to take their place. For the girls whom I knew, this departure from the ghats seemed to be bittersweet. On the one hand, it entailed a significant loss of freedom and mobility. Playtime with friends and access to the fresh air, open spaces, and the excitement of the riverfront were replaced with many more solitary hours of watching TV and doing domestic chores in tight living quarters. For instance, when Anjali was finally forced by her parents to give up working on the ghats because she had begun menstruating, she became frustrated and depressed. When I would visit her at home, she would speak longingly of the freedoms and pleasures she had previously enjoyed.

On the other hand, some of the girls embraced their retirement with a quiet delight. Instead of lamenting the loss of freedom, they seemed excited about moving closer to a new world of womanhood. Malika often told me that she had no desires to return to the ghats, and preferred staying at home and working. Her mother echoed these sentiments. “She is becoming big now,” Sharmila said to me one afternoon, “So she should stay at home. On the ghats one encounters all kinds of people (ghat par har tarik ka log aatta hai). The atmosphere is not good for girls once they become big.”

Indeed, most of the girls seemed to adjust to these new understandings of the ghats quickly. What they once regarded as a relatively friendly place to work and play subsequently emerged as a space of potential danger, where they risked being overexposed to lascivious men and ruthless gossip. One day, for example, I ran into Rita Sahani while she was visiting with her aunt, who owned a bangle stand in the bazaar. A few years before, Rita had been one of the most active girls peddling on the ghats, but by the time I returned to begin my fieldwork she too had retired. Rita had grown considerably, and she broke into a semi-embarrassed smile when I commented on how lovely her blue eye shadow and nail polish looked. I joined Rita and her aunt for a cup of tea and she told me about her new job doing domestic work for a nearby family. “I decided to stop selling on the ghats,” she said. “Very dirty things happen there.” “Yes,” her aunt quickly added, “the people on the ghats are very dirty. It is not a good place for girls like Rita. If you are poor girl like Rita on the ghats the boys will always be propositioning you.”

Boys on the Ghats

While the girls were forced into an early retirement in order to safeguard their reputations and thereby “the honor” of their families, the boys were more or less free to participate in this informal economy as long as they wanted—though
this was not encouraged. There was definitely pressure on the boys to find more “stable” and “respectable” work, particularly once they neared the age of marriage. Moreover, as the boys themselves often emphasized, once they “got big and they were not as cute anymore,” earning money from tourists became more difficult. Many of the older boys who still worked as guides spoke nostalgically of their lucrative “golden years” when their childish charm and appearance rendered them “irresistible” to foreign visitors.

In what follows, I introduce some of the boys who worked at Dasashwamedh Ghat, most of whom were between the ages of eight and fourteen. As will be seen, girls and boys not only had very different work trajectories. They also had very different ways of rendering their work meaningful.

The Importance of Earning: Money Can Buy You Love

Most of the boys I knew at Dasashwamedh Ghat also told me that they began working on the riverfront because of troubles at home. However, in contrast to the girls, the boys did not have to rely upon this narrative to legitimate their participation in this informal economy. In fact, when the boys spoke about why they were working on the riverfront, they focused less on the economic necessities they faced, and much more on the moral compulsion they felt to pull their own weight and contribute to their families. For the boys, the importance of earning was internalized at an early age. Young boys, especially those who were not studying in school (as was the case with many of the boys on the ghats), were repeatedly shamed for “eating without earning” (sirf baith ke khana khate hain). Indeed, the threat of this rebuke animated many of our conversations, and on several occasions, I heard this charge being wielded by angry parents. By working with foreign tourists, therefore, the boys found one avenue to assert their sense of masculine responsibility and prove themselves as good and caring family members. The following account of Jay Yadav provides one example.

Jay

I first met Jay when he was ten years old and peddling postcards on the ghats. When I returned in 2000 to begin my fieldwork, he was still selling postcards, but he had also begun actively guiding and doing commission work. Jay was a quiet and relatively shy boy with a slight frame and a serious disposition. Unlike many of the other boys, Jay did not live in the immediate neighborhood, nor did he come from the Mallah caste. His father worked in a printing shop, and his family’s home was located near Naya Sarak, about fifteen minutes away. Jay was the second youngest of six children. His mother had died from tuberculosis when he was eight years old, and he was being raised primarily by his older siblings. When his older brother Raj began driving an auto rickshaw near
Dasashwamedh, Jay began accompanying him and eventually he began selling on the ghat. As was the case with Malika and the other children, I primarily got to know Jay through our informal conversations and by spending lots of time with him both on and off the riverfront. However, before my fieldwork concluded, I asked him to sit down with me and tell me about his experiences working on the ghats.

JH: So you’ve been doing this for two years. How did you start? For instance, did you decide one day, “Okay, I’m going to start selling postcards”?

JY: No, for five or six months I used to come to the ghats every day and I would come every day and watch how the boys would talk to the tourists, so I would just listen. I wouldn’t say anything. I would pick up two words and then go tell them to a different tourist. So in this way, for one year I kept asking tourists about the meanings of different words. So the tourists would say, “this means this, this means that.” The tourists gave so much knowledge.

As I will discuss in chapter 6, Jay’s rather gradual entrance into this informal economy was also linked to the fact that he was an outsider. In order to sell on the ghats, he not only had to learn the right way to speak to tourists but also had to establish himself with the other boys from the neighborhood. Eventually, Jay did manage to befriend several of the boys and develop working relationships with them. I often sensed that some of his chronic seriousness, however, stemmed from his outsider status, which rendered him more susceptible to bullying and abuse. There were several times throughout my fieldwork when such incidents did occur, and though he never followed through, in every instance Jay vowed that he was going to quit selling on the ghats forever. In fact, even in our interview Jay emphasized that he was only doing this work because “he had to.” As he explained:

I will tell you about the troubles at home that require me to do this. No one likes to do business. There is always an unavoidable reason why a man has to do this work, something that forces him to do this work. For those who have nothing better to do they come to the ghats. By talking to English people you end up getting some money and work. A man thinks, “If you sit at home idly then you won’t be able to get food.” But if you go to the ghat and sit and talk with a tourist then maybe they will help you and give you something.

While both Jay and Malika emphasized that their work on the riverfront was an act of necessity rather than something being pursued for fun or as a hobby, their accounts also differed in interesting ways—particularly in regard to the emphasis that Jay placed on pulling his own weight and keeping his family happy. As he continued:
My work is selling to tourists so I can make a profit so that I can give money for my school or if there is any problem at home then I can give money to my family, and I stay happy and my family stays happy. Then, at least I am doing something for my family and I’m not just sitting and eating. This way, I earn and don’t just eat like I am a useless (phaltu) or incapable person. Any man who does business does it for the happiness and progress (taraqqi) of his family.

The idea that children would or should earn money to keep their families happy is unsettling for many people in Western capitalist society, and it certainly disturbed many of the tourists whom I interviewed. Not only did this conjure up fears of callous caretakers and exploited or exploitable children. It also violated tourists’ cherished belief that familial love, and perhaps love more generally, should be unconditional and not something that is given or withheld because of fluctuations in one’s income. For sure, similar ideas may be found within India as well, and certainly, the image of the overindulged Indian son and his doting, altruistic, symbiotic mother, has been commented upon in anthropological, psychoanalytic, and popular discourses (Copeman 2009, 47; Kakar 1981).

The boys who worked on the riverfront, however, frequently offered a very different version or rather, vision, of the parent-child relationship—one that was far less altruistic. There were times when these boys clearly felt that their family relationships and attachments, and even their own sense of worth, were being constructed and calculated in explicitly instrumental terms. In fact, they often suggested that money did buy them love at home, or at least, extra affection, praise, and attention from their parents. As Keshwar Pandey remarked to me one day, “I get headaches when a few days pass and I don’t sell any postcards and I have no money to give at home. My parents get angry, they call me a loafer. They threaten not to give me food.” Pramod, whom I introduced earlier and who sold fans and colors on the ghat, had similar experiences. Pramod’s parents had died several years before, and his primary caretaker was his aunt. When I would see him running to and fro on the ghat with his supplies in hand, he often greeted me by saying, “Hi Jenny, I have to go. Remember, as long as I am making money I will have an aunt (jab tak paisa rahega tab tak chachi rahegi). If that ends, so will the love between us.”

Of Debts and Distinctions

Although the boys often drew attention to the instrumental nature of their relationships with their family members, and suggested that there was indeed a correlation between the amount of money they earned and gave at home and the amount of affection they received, they also interpreted the significance of their earnings through a more devotional register. What was interesting was
the way these boys reevaluated their earnings as part of a domestic devotional economy. Many of the boys emphasized that they had an obligation to “repay” their parents, and particularly their mothers, for all of the sacrifices they had made on their behalf. From the boys’ perspectives, one of the most helpful and convenient ways for them to do this was by earning money and easing the financial burden at home. “Mothers,” I was frequently told by the boys, “give us life, so we must also give to them” (Ma to janam dete hain, to ham ko bhi dena hai). Thus, instead of diametrically opposing instrumentality versus sentimentality, or economic versus cultural and moral concerns, these boys (and girls) also seemed quite capable of conjoining these different registers of value, and rendering them “interoperable” (Copeman 2009, 4).

The boys were also very eager to emphasize that they were in fact earning their money and not getting it by other disreputable means. I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter 6, but one example occurred on a late March afternoon. A Korean filmmaking team was in town, and some of the children and I were invited to watch the shooting on the other side of the river. While we boated over, I was talking with Jaggu Mukherjee. Jaggu was eleven years old and had been selling colors on the ghat for almost two years. His older brother Mohan was about to turn thirteen, and he was also involved in peddling and guiding. Seated beside us was another boy named Ravi, whom I regularly encountered in tattered clothes, begging on the ghats. After speaking with Jaggu for a while, I turned and asked Ravi if he ever sold postcards, diyas, or colors. Before he could reply, Jaggu excitedly interrupted. He began cupping his hands to his mouth saying, “Oh no! This helpless fellow is poor, he can’t sell like we do, he begs.” Jaggu’s reaction again made me realize just how concerned these children were with distinguishing themselves from the poorer children who came to Dashashwamedh to beg. The children who worked on the ghats often displayed compassion for the children who begged, and they even spoke of how “auspicious” their blessings were. But, it was very clear that they did not want to be lumped into the same category. This was particularly interesting in light of the fact that children like Jaggu and Mohan often played “the poverty card” in their attempts to earn more money from Western tourists. However, from their perspective, this was part of an earning strategy that required the mastery of certain skills and knowledge, or in Bourdieu’s terms, a certain amount of “cultural capital” that these less fortunate children did not possess (Bourdieu 1984, 1993).

**Seeking Fun, Freedom, Fortune, and Fame**

Although the boys felt a moral obligation to earn, in contrast to the girls, their narratives also placed much more emphasis on the fun and “fantastic” elements of working with foreign tourists. The boys were much more imaginatively
invested in this informal tourist economy. For them, working with foreign tourists led to fantasies of striking it rich, of consuming new pleasures, and of achieving fame by having one’s name and reputation, if not oneself, travel to distant lands. Many of the boys also said that they liked working with foreign tourists because foreign people treated them with respect and did not care about caste distinctions the way Indian customers did. Finally, the boys often said that they chose this work because they liked the freedom of being their own bosses. Instead of having to be beholden to someone else’s schedule and demands, they could work when they wanted to, spend time with their friends, enjoy the fresh air (hawa pani) of the riverfront, and actually have fun while they were making money. The following examples demonstrate how the pursuit of fun, freedom, fortune, and fame animated the boys’ experiences and the way they rendered their work meaningful.

**Pramod**

Of all the young boys on the ghat, Pramod Sahani was one of the most popular with foreign tourists, and by most people’s account, one of the most financially successful. I first met him when he was ten years old and I had recently arrived in Banaras to study Hindi. I was sitting on the steps at Dasashwamedh when Pramod approached me with a fast-talking, joke-cracking sales pitch. Later, I came to recognize this as one of his signature sales moves. Despite his pitching me a fireball of charm, I declined to buy the fans he was peddling that morning, but explained to him that there would be many more opportunities for him to try his luck with me.

When I came to know Pramod better, we often spoke about why he was doing this work and what he liked and disliked about it. As I mentioned earlier, his parents had died several years before and although they had left him a small shop and a residential property to inherit upon turning eighteen, he was living with his aunt and felt compelled to contribute to the household expenses. Pramod was a very bold and a self-proclaimed “stubborn” young boy. He told me that he worked on the ghats because he did not like having to obey anybody else’s orders. He also said that the money he made by selling to foreign tourists far exceeded what he would make if he sold to Indian customers or if he worked for a salary in a shop or factory. Several of the other boys on the ghats had experimented with such options, but they quit because they found the work too boring, dirty, physically demanding, or underpaid. “When you work with tourists,” Pramod said, “they take you to movies, they take you to eat in restaurants, you get to see all of the city! Why would a boy want to sit in a shop all day, getting tea for a boss? We make money and we have fun, no one tells us what to do, what could be better?”

By the time I had returned to Banaras, Pramod’s success had reached legendary proportions. Stories and rumors circulated that he had sold paper fans
to tourists for as much as $100 apiece, and that he regularly earned three or four hundred rupees a day just by peddling on the ghats. While the money was undoubtedly important to Pramod, it seemed that he enjoyed the stories of his success as much as the actual earnings (the amount of which he never did disclose to me). He often spoke proudly of the fact that he had achieved this level of fame, not only among people on the ghats but also among foreign tourists who continued to write to him, send him money and presents, and even recommend him to subsequent customers who were visiting Banaras. Nor was Pramod alone in this respect. Many of the boys told me that one of the things they liked most about this work was that it gave them a chance to “make a name” for themselves. I often heard the boys say things like, “I am famous in Spain, all of the Spanish tourists who come here ask for me.” Or, as Mohan remarked one day, “I think by doing this work I will develop a name, and people in all the corners of the world will remember me.” In fact, it took me a while to realize that this desire for fame and recognition was also frequently expressed through recurring complaints of how “selfish” foreign tourists could be, how they went away and “forgot” about the people whom they met in Banaras.

At first, I dismissed these comments as generic criticisms that the boys unloaded when they were having bad days. However, over time, I began to realize that having one’s name celebrated, remembered, and circulated not only enhanced the boys’ self-esteem and sense of importance; in their minds, it also brought possibilities for greater earnings in the future. For as they had observed, there were many instances when new tourists did come asking for a particular boy on the ghats. Indeed, the boys’ recurring emphasis on fame and forgetting raise some interesting parallels with Nancy Munn’s study of value creation and transformation in the island society of Gawa. In *The Fame of Gawa*, Munn develops the notion of “spacetime as the relevant potency and value parameter” within Gawan society (1992). Munn argues that in the Gawan case, “value may be characterized in terms of an act’s relative capacity to extend or expand . . . intersubjective spacetime—a spacetime of self-other relationships formed in and through acts and practices” (Munn 1992, 9). For the Gawa, such practices often include the reciprocal giving of food, kula shells, or building canoes, but Munn also cites remembering as a “subjective act” that is regarded as having a formidable “productive capacity.” For the Gawa, she writes, “one’s gifts’ are the means of moving the mind of the other . . . they emphasize the importance of remembering as the means by which acts occurring at a given time (or spatiotemporal locus) may be projected forward and their capacities retained so that they may yield desired outcomes at a later time” (9–10). One of the ways these boys tried to increase their chances of being remembered, and thus increase the likelihood of yielding desired outcomes in the future, was by sending gifts and writing letters to tourists which, not surprisingly, often ended with the refrain, “please don’t forget me.”
At the Center of the World

In *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*, Mark Liechty writes of the “anxiety” and “peripheral consciousness” that configures the self-understanding of young middle-class males in Kathmandu, many of whom work in the foreign tourist trade. He finds that these young men experience themselves as caught between “the dream of modernity” and the “lived” realities of growing up on the global “periphery.” According to Liechty, “The entire discourse of modernization, progress, and development fuse with the image worlds of media” to give these young men “an acute sense of marginality” (Liechty 2003, 238–239). These males frequently fashion themselves after foreign film actors and lifestyles, and in the process, he argues, they “have trouble identifying a place for identity.” In many ways, they end up cultivating an inferiority complex and come to feel that Kathmandu offers an inadequate substitute for real life, which they perceive as existing elsewhere (240).

Liechty’s study provides a productive foil for thinking about the boys who worked at Dasashwamedh. Although their fear of being forgotten may suggest that these boys harbored deep anxieties about being peripheral, in many respects, their consciousness would be more aptly characterized as centripetal. The boys I knew often seemed to imagine themselves as being and working at the very center of the world. They would proudly exclaim, “Why do we need to go anywhere else when everyone comes to us?” “Every kind of person comes to Dasashwamedh. Tourists and pilgrims, criminals and scholars, famous holy men and politicians, even Indian and international movie stars!” In terms of geography, the boys lived a very parochial existence, perhaps even more so than the young men Liechty describes. Most of their time was spent moving back and forth between the ghats and the tea stalls that were nestled at the end of the main road above the riverfront. In many ways, however, they experienced this space as a central artery through which people from all over the world, and from every walk of life, passed. Thus, if the girls sought to safeguard their reputations by domesticating the ghats and rendering them a virtual extension of the home, the boys sought to enhance theirs by casting Dasashwamedh as a virtual microcosm of the planet.22

Moreover, when these boys did articulate feelings of being on the periphery, it was expressed in more local rather than global coordinates. In terms of their media consumption, Bollywood, not Hollywood, provided the preferred imaginary Other and model of the good life. If they spoke of being marginalized in society, their grievances were usually framed in terms of local caste and class inequalities or in relation to their illegal and quasi-persecuted status as unlicensed guides and commission agents. Finally, when they discussed their aspirations for the future, the boys of Dasashwamedh did not usually talk about wanting to travel abroad, or live like foreigners do, or even move to another
city. As I will discuss shortly, what these boys hoped for and aspired to was the possibility of moving up from the rough and tough world of the ghats, where one was perpetually chasing customers and subject to police harassment, to a more “respectable” and “established” life in the bazaar or, as they often put it, “in the world above.”

**Spaces of Surveillance**

For the boys at Dasashwamedh, the riverfront served numerous functions. In addition to being a place to earn money, it provided the primary space for these boys to play. This often included swimming, boating, playing cricket, cards, marbles, dice games, gambling, or just palling around with friends. In fact, many of the boys spent more time on the ghats than they did at home. As Dipesh (age ten) explained: “Home is a place to eat and sleep but we don’t like to stay there, it is better to be on the ghats, we are free here, we can do what we want.” This was true, to an extent. Most of the boys who worked on the ghat lived in small one- or two-room homes where there was little opportunity to escape a parent’s gaze or family presence. In certain respects, therefore, they had more “privacy” and freedom when they were in public. Like the girls, the boys found opportunities to sequester play spaces for themselves. However, they were also aware of three major forms of surveillance that threatened to hinder both their recreation and business: kin relations, neighbors, and the police.

The boys were highly cognizant of the presence of relatives and neighbors when they were playing and working on the ghats, and this became significant for two main reasons. First, there was the fear that these onlookers would report any misdeeds to their parents. For instance, every Saturday afternoon I would go to Jaggu and Mohan Mukherjee’s house to eat lunch with their older sister Bharati and mother Devika. On one occasion, the ladies and I were knuckle deep in rice and lentils (*kitchari*) when Mohan arrived home for his afternoon meal. When Mohan had barely stepped inside the door, his mother exploded at him, “You bastard! I heard from Malika’s mother that you are wandering around with a bunch of bad boys on the ghats and that you have been smoking cigarettes! Don’t come here for food! I am not feeding you today!” Mohan immediately protested, saying that it was a lie, but Devika just continued to berate him as he slumped into the corner and watched us finish our meal.

Second, as is more generally the case in India, juniors are expected to show deference to their elders, whether they be significantly older, such as a parent or grandparent, or even just an older sibling. Showing deference not only involves using the appropriate forms of address. It also often involves affecting a more demure and discreet manner before one’s elders. In some cases, it may entail avoiding them altogether, for in mixed company the presence of a junior can
become an interactional burden for the elder, as well. In terms of both play and work, this deference code helped maintain a certain kind of order on the ghats, but it also created some interactional challenges for the boys. For instance, although Mohan and Jaggu were just two years apart, and both of them were friends with Pramod, the three boys never played all together. I realized this one day when Pramod was happily telling me about a picnic that he, Mohan and some other boys were planning on the other side of the river. “What about Jaggu I asked? Isn’t he going? He’s your friend?” “Of course not,” Pramod replied. “He can’t go, we will be joking and having fun and enjoying ourselves and if Jaggu went then Mohan would not be able to enjoy himself freely. Jaggu knows this. He is respecting his older brother.” Alternatively, when the boys were trying to “woo” and impress their customers (grahak ko patana) they often said that they felt encumbered by the presence of older relatives. “We get embarrassed if we are joking around with a tourist and an elder is nearby. It doesn’t feel right to us.” Jay explained.

The biggest encumbrance, however, was the chronic threat of the police. Unlicensed guiding was and still is illegal in Banaras, and all the boys I knew had stories about being harassed and even beaten by the police. In fact, at the time of my research, a special Tourism Police Task Force was being developed to help put an end to the practice, and the crackdown on unlicensed tourism workers escalated considerably.23 As Jay explained, “If the police see you talking to a tourist for a long time, or walking around with one, then they call you over and demand money. Sometimes if I am with a tourist and I see the police I walk away from my customer.” Or, as Ramesh told me one day, “They know how to beat us so that we don’t get any bruises, then they take our money. I started hiding my money in my shoes but if they demand it and you don’t give it to them things just become worse.” Raju (age eleven), who also sold postcards, said, “The number-one rule on the ghats is that you have to give the police 30 percent of everything you make. Otherwise, they will trouble you constantly.” Indeed, a number of the boys did pay off the police on a weekly (hafta), or monthly (mahina) basis, but many of them, as Pramod explained, regarded this as a self-defeating strategy. “Some of the boys pay them hafta but once you start doing that you can never stop. So I have never done it.”

In Search of Respect

For the boys on the riverfront, police harassment certainly posed aggravating and practical challenges to their attempts to earn a living. The boys also resented their interventions, however, because they found them deeply humiliating. “They beat us with their sticks like dogs. They can do what they want to us.” “There is no respect in this line,” the boys would often say. “The police can
catch you and beat you at any time.” Thus, while the informal tourist economy provided these boys with a chance to pursue fun, freedom, fortune, and fame, it also made them feel as though they had to constantly struggle for respect and survival. As will be seen, this struggle was experienced and articulated in different ways.

Many of the boys told me that peddling and guiding were disrespected not only because they were readily subject to humiliating police harassment but also because both were forms of “wandering work” (ghumney wale kam). When the boys talked about what they hoped for in the future they almost always spoke of “establishing their own place” (apna sthan) where customers would come to them. As was the case with the girls, the boys also felt frustrated and sometimes insulted when tourists would shoo them away or rudely refuse the items they were selling. As Raju said when I interviewed him, “It would be much better to have a shop in the bazaar, where you sit in your own place and customers come to you. I don’t like it when the customers wave me away or tell me to stop bothering them.” Certainly, it was possible to have a “fixed” place on the ghats, as well. There were garland sellers like Malika’s mother, who set up their shop in the same place every day, as well tea stalls and cold drink stands that were more or less permanent fixtures on the ghats. However, moving up into the bazaar was significant for these boys, because it was also seen as a qualitatively different, and in many ways socially more respectable, space. The boys often referred to the bazaar as “the world above” where important contacts could be made and where people behaved with a greater degree of civility. “The people who work above meet important people, good people, and become acquainted with them” (jo log uppar kam karte hain, ve bare logo se milte hain, acche logo se milte hain, aur un ki parichit ban jati hain). “They speak nicely with each other, they have a good manner about them” (ve log qaayde se bat karte hain, unka vyavhar bahut acche hote hain).

In contrast, the ghats were described as “the world below” (nitchi wali duniya) or as a “separate world” (ghat to alag duniya) that was distinguished by its rough and tough atmosphere and déclassé inhabitants. As Raju explained, “To survive on the ghats you must learn how to insult others. Otherwise people there will think you are straight and they will abuse you.” Jay agreed. In our interview he remarked:

**JY:** As is the environment so is the intelligence that comes to one. This is a very dirty environment, there is much filth here (jaisa maulah wasi buddhi ayegi, yeh mahaul bahut ganda hai. Yahan pe bahut gandagi hoti hain). If you have to live on the ghats then you have to become a mongrel/deceitful person (dogla), if you are straight (sidha) then all the boys will bother you. If you are a mongrel and some boy speaks rudely to you then you will also speak rudely and he will go away. If you are straight and you’re sitting and talking,
if you have money he will take your money by force. But if you’re a mongrel and he even asks you for five rupees then you will say, “Get lost, I don’t have any money.” If you talk like that he will go away. But if you are straight, on the ghats, you shouldn’t be straight with anyone. You should be straight with those who are straight.

JH: So you are not straight?

JY: I am both straight and crooked.

Jay’s remarks are interesting for a number of reasons. First, his perspective on the corrosive elements of tourism work differed significantly from the perspective offered by many local adults. As I will discuss in chapter 5, many of the adults I knew in Dasashwamedh tended to blame Western tourists, and more specifically Western money, for corrupting the children who worked in this informal economy. Jay suggested, however, that the real problem was domestic “filth.” He proposed that the boys on the ghats were forced to become deceitful and “crooked” in order to survive in this tough and often violent atmosphere. Second, Jay’s remarks are noteworthy because they also reflect a set of culturally pervasive ideas regarding the relationship between places, persons, and the (in)compatibility of different substances. The idea that people are “substantially” transformed in and through their transactions with others has been noted by many anthropologists working in South Asia (E. V. Daniel 1984; Lamb 2000; Marriott 1976, 1990). Here, Jay’s invocation of the term *dogla*, which literally translates as a person or animal of mixed blood and figuratively connotes the idea of someone who is cunning and deceitful, captures this concept succinctly. This concern with mixing and contamination also surfaced later in the interview, when I asked Jay how Western tourists perceived the boys on the ghats. He replied: “They think we are dirty because we drink dirty Ganga water. They would not want to marry Indian boys.”

If the boys sometimes saw themselves as “dirty” when they looked through the eyes of their foreign Other, they also inverted the charge by repeatedly emphasizing how unclean Western tourists were. Indeed, some of the boys cited their exposure to these polluted people as one of the reasons why their work was regarded with such little respect. For example, Gappa Sahani (age seventeen and a guide at Dasashwamedh), explained:

**GS:** There is no respect in this work because everyone thinks that we just chase after Angreze [Westerners] like dogs. People think, “Oh, this motherfucker always keeps tagging behind foreigners, he must be a beggar.” That’s why people think this is dog’s work, what’s the use? It is worthless. If you do your own real work then there is some respect in that.

**JH:** Suppose you don’t chase after Angreze but work with Indian people?

**GS:** There is respect in that.
JH: Really? So if you work with foreigners then it is dishonorable but if you work with Indians it’s okay? Why is it like that?
GS: Because they are Indians and foreigners live in a very dirty way. They don’t keep their bodies clean. They wipe their noses with paper and keep it in their pockets, they don’t wash their hands, that’s why. People think Angreze are dirty.

Gappa’s remarks actually bring together a number of different issues. He was certainly concerned with the stigmatized nature of “wandering work” and the perception that working with foreign tourists might be regarded as potentially polluting. However, his response also returns us to the fear these boys had of being perceived as “beggars” who merely tagged after tourists looking for handouts, rather than earning their money through respectable means. Finally, even if the boys were not worried about being perceived as “beggars,” they were still aware that many people did not regard guiding as a form of “real” work. Shop owners, for instance, frequently told me that there was “no hard work involved in guiding” (is kam me koi mehnat nahi hai).

When I would share such opinions with the boys, they often responded with outrage, and they would go into great detail about the amount of physical exertion that guiding required. For instance, as Mohan remarked:

Look, in the hot season a boy goes to the ghats to find customers, if he meets a customer he has to take him around by walking, and if he gets caught by the police he has to give them money. If he doesn’t get caught then he has to wander around in the hot sun. When he has to walk far that’s a lot of work. If a customer says, “Take me walking from Raj Ghat to Assi,” so isn’t there hard work involved in that? Then he has to take him to the shopkeepers. How can anyone say that there isn’t hard work involved? If I go from here to Godolia to look for customers, isn’t that work? These men sit in shops and think that we just fleece the Angrez (Angrez ko mus lete hain). “Cheat” them. We do cheat people but we also work hard.

Or as Jay interjected with great enthusiasm: “No, listen! You should have said this to the shopkeeper. ‘First, in such strong sun, if any man comes to the ghats to do business and stays for ten hours then it is certain that his health will have to become bad!’ You tell the man who said this that, you tell him that, ‘Saying is very easy and doing is very difficult!’ We people take postcards and look for customers and wander far in the hot sun, from here to there so that we can get some benefit and be able to buy some things.”

In their ongoing “search for respect” (Bourgois 1996), the boys did more than emphasize the physical demands of guiding. For instance, Jay went on to talk about how much intelligence, diplomatic skill, and bravery it required to survive on the ghats:
JH: Do you think that a boy should have certain kinds of qualities to do this work? For example should he be funny or serious? How should he be?

JY: Look, a boy should have three minds for this. First strength (dam), he should have power in him (us me bal rahena chahiye, jaise koi taaqat hai). Second, he should have brains (dimag) and intelligence (buddhi). He should know how to keep a man under his influence and spell (kis prakar se admi ko vash mein kar sakta hai). He should know in what way he will earn his money. And third, if there is anyone who is doing any kind of fighting, then he should be able to mediate and ask, “Why are you fighting? Please don’t fight, this isn’t good for you.” He should be able to explain things so that it will be settled.

JH: So you shouldn’t fight?

JY: No.

JH: Is there a lot of fighting on the ghats?

JY: It happens . . . there are some men who insult others in order to earn their money. For instance if I have a customer they will say bad things about me in order to woo the customer for himself. My habit is that I should earn and I should also let him earn his living. This way I may be happy and he may be happy. This doesn’t mean that you should go ahead and steal my livelihood (pet ka roti china chahiye) and eat for yourself.

Jay was not the only boy who lived and worked by a moral “code.” In fact, in chapter 6, I examine the rules that regulated the children’s earning practices, and I discuss how they were and were not reflective of a larger moral economy that was premised upon the idea that “everyone should have a chance to earn.” However, here I want to point out that although the boys frequently complained about the “dirty,” violent, and uncouth atmosphere on the ghats, they also incorporated these grievances into more valorizing representations and understandings of themselves. As Pramod said to me one day with a gleam of pride in his eyes, “Look, Jenny, not just any boy can do this work. It takes a special kind.”

Concluding Considerations: Class, Caste, and Neighborhood

In her preliminary study of “the structure and imagining of space in the lives of children,” Nita Kumar rightly notes that within the city of Banaras gender plays a fundamental role in shaping children’s experiences. She makes some pivotal observations about the ways adults use space to socialize children along gendered lines, and she raises important questions about how children “reappropriate space” and use tactics, both overt and clandestine, “to escape the nets of disciplining.” Finally, she suggests that greater attention must be paid to the ways children “participate in their own socialization” (Kumar 2007, 246).

In many ways, the examples I have presented reinforce Kumar’s findings. Gender not only influenced the children’s access to difference spaces in the
city but it also shaped the way they experienced and negotiated these spaces. Girls were limited to selling postcards, diyas, and tea on the riverfront (where their behavior and actions could be more closely monitored), whereas boys were free to roam about the city and participate in the more lucrative enterprise of guiding and commission work. Although both girls and boys frequently alluded to the rough and “dirty” atmosphere on the ghats, they emphasized different strategies for surviving in such an environment. The boys thought it was crucial to learn how “to insult others” and become “crooked” and “tough.” The girls, by contrast, continually tried to demonstrate how “straight” and virtuous they were. In fact, the very ways in which they narrated their involvement in this informal economy were geared toward maintaining such an image. This included: continually emphasizing their necessity to work and rejecting any suggestions that they were earning money to indulge their own interests or pleasures; domesticating the ghats and casting it as a safer place to work; and disciplining each other through forms of ridicule that were meant to ensure proper feminine behavior and decorum.

So long as the girls were considered children, the riverfront was regarded as a fairly innocuous space for them to work in, and their presence on the ghats was socially tolerated, even if it was not deemed socially desirable. It was once these girls “got big” and neared the age of sexual maturity that working on the riverfront became problematic. In order to safeguard their reputations, the girls were removed from the riverfront and placed under much closer supervision in the home. For girls, therefore, the passage from childhood to adolescence was much more clearly and abruptly marked than it was for boys, and it involved a radical withdrawal from the public sphere. The boys, on the other hand, were more or less free to continue doing this work as long as they wanted, and they were also much more imaginatively invested in it than the girls. Boys often spoke of the fun, freedom, and fame that came from working with foreign tourists, and they associated it with possibilities for better futures.

Clearly, therefore, gender played a pivotal role. However, the children’s experiences, both spatially and otherwise, were also considerably shaped by their class, caste, and neighborhood affiliations. If we want to grasp the complexity and diversity of children’s lives, these aspects of identity warrant much closer attention. Kumar herself alludes to this when she says, “of course, class is important,” but she then goes on to say that “class socialization is much weaker than gender socialization. Unlike with gender where both parents are simultaneously present for comparison, there is no other model before the child except the home she is born into” (Kumar 2007, 259).

What I observed in and through my interactions with the children on the ghats suggests otherwise. The children themselves were often concerned with discussing and analyzing the differences between the “rich” and the “poor,” and
they were extremely sensitive to class- and caste-based insults; indeed, these were frequently used by the children as means to discipline and humiliate each other. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, working on the ghats often provided these children with significant opportunities for self-reflection. By interacting with tourists and local people, the children did have the chance to confront alternative models outside of the home and reevaluate their lives through the eyes of Others.

Kumar is correct when she notes that there are significant contrasts between the spatial freedoms afforded to boys and the spatial restrictions placed on girls: “Apart from traveling to and from school, mobility is not a structural characteristic for girls. They do not go out for pleasure, for hanging out, or to pass the time. There would be nowhere to go. A street side, pan shop, tea shop, or any open urban space is not the provenance of the female of any age, unless they are professionals or otherwise have work” (Kumar 2007, 262). This observation, however, again needs to be qualified by the examples presented in this chapter. In many regards, the lower-class girls who worked on the ghats had much more mobility and freedom from the home than middle-class girls their age. Moreover, under the cover of work, they were able to sequester play spaces for themselves on the riverfront and escape, at least for a little while, the nets of adult disciplining.

Alternatively, although the boys I knew were free to “wander,” their experiences of space and city were also significantly mediated by their class positions and aspirations, as well as by their caste and neighborhood affiliations. As I will discuss further in chapter 6, boys who did not come from the immediate neighborhood of Manmandir and who did not have a set of elder kinsmen with territorial rights on the ghats had a much more difficult time establishing themselves on the riverfront. Finally, for many of these boys, the difference between the riverfront and the “the world above” was not just a strictly spatial issue, but a social one. They were regarded as qualitatively different spaces that both required and reflected different kinds of social and cultural capital and different kinds of hopes for the future. In the next two chapters, I explore how Western tourists and local adults assessed the children on the riverfront and again, I consider how these assessments were linked to particular spatial experiences and imaginings.