People in Dasashwamedh also had opposite reactions to the children on the riverfront. The boys’ behavior evoked fears of dark futures, barren money, and loafer lifestyles. For instance, Anand Sahani, a local silk merchant, explained: “These boys loaf around and have fun, but their futures will be dark. No one can digest the money earned in the tourist line. When these boys die they will not even have money for a shroud; they will be cremated without one. This is the meaning of the guiding line.” By contrast, the girls were frequently commended for their work with foreign tourists. As Sharmila recounted, “When Malika began working with foreign tourists, we received so many things, and tourists gave her so much money that it was like the Goddess Laxmi had entered my house. She saved our family by doing this work!” How are we to interpret these differences? Why were the boys’ earnings typically cast as indigestible, whereas the girls’ earnings were viewed as fecund?

In this chapter I pursue this question by drawing upon some of the anthropological literature on “money and the morality of exchange” (Parry and Bloch 1989). As Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch propose, the symbolism of money “relates to culturally constructed notions of production, consumption, circulation and exchange.” “In order to understand the way in which money is viewed it is vitally important to understand the cultural matrix into which it is incorporated” (1). In what follows, therefore, I explore how people in Dasashwamedh evaluated the earning, spending, and saving practices of the girls and boys on the riverfront. As will be seen, through their earnings and savings, girls were praised for contributing to the reproduction of their families, as well to the reproduction of a social and moral order that was highly valued. When it came to the boys, however, people in Dasashwamedh often felt that their earning and particularly spending practices were at odds
with traditional conceptions of the good life and emblematic of some of the larger ills of Indian modernity. Thus, despite their varying efforts to regulate this economy through an informal division of labor, and moral expectations regarding “everyone’s right to earn,” most of the time the boys were depicted as perpetuating an immoral economy that placed individual pursuits and pleasures over and above a concern for others.

**Little Laxmis**

During her four-year tenure working on the ghats, Malika had managed to establish a number of ongoing relationships with tourists who had become fairly regular benefactors for her and her family. As Sharmila explained:

Westerners were really impressed with how sensible Malika was at such a young age. They became so fond of her, just as though she was their daughter. Some of them actually called her their own daughter. They would ask me to give them Malika and I would say, “No, she is my life, if I give her away what will I do?” Many people said to me, “Give her to me, I will get her educated and keep her properly and when she grows up your daughter will come back to you.” And it was Westerners who used to buy her all the things that she needed for school. All of them said the same thing: “Educate her so that her brain may become sharper than it already is!” I began receiving letters from abroad every month. Not a month passed when we did not get a letter from abroad for Malika. We began receiving so many gifts from abroad, people began sending her photographs, books, toys, all these things, money. One man even bought her a boat so that we would be able to continue to earn money.

Certainly, not all of the girls on the riverfront achieved the kind of financial success that Malika enjoyed as a young girl. Nor were they all likened to Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. However, like Sharmila, people in Dasashwamedh were far more apt to cast the girls as productive contributors to the household economy than they did the boys. They repeatedly emphasized that whereas boys might give a little of their earnings to their parents, girls typically passed on most, if not all the money they made. As Sharmila went on to explain: “As for boys, when they start doing this work, they do what they want. When they get money from tourists they go off and get into some addiction or the other, they smoke cigarettes, or they will go see movies. They will only hand over 100 rupees to their parents, thinking this is enough to make their parents happy. But my daughters are not like that. Now that Jaila and Ritthi are doing this work, they give me whatever they earn. Only after handing me all the money do they take whatever they need.” Or, as Madhuri noted when contrasting her daughters Anjali, Mona, and Gulab, with her son Maneesh, “My girls always think of me first,
they understand my troubles, they bring their money home. They do not always make very much but they think of me first and give me whatever they make. My son thinks only of himself. He goes and blows most of his money in the bazaar” (*bazaar me paisa uraata hai*). 

In addition to augmenting the family income, the girls’ earnings were rendered fecund because they helped to reproduce important social relationships and values. By relinquishing their earnings, the girls helped to sustain the normative hierarchies that structured relationships between parents and children. They also demonstrated their feminine capacity for self-restraint and reinforced the ideology that “belonging to a group is more important than individual goals and aspirations” (Wadley 2002, II). Moreover, these examples suggest that the “productivity” of the girls’ money was not necessarily linked to the amount earned, but rather to whether or not it was properly circulated. In fact, many people claimed that one of the advantages that the girls had over the boys was precisely the fact they did not earn too much. I was often told that the girls made an appropriate (*ucit*) amount of money. As Diraj Sahani observed: “This work is okay for girls. Their earnings are appropriate. They sell diyas, some sell postcards. They make some money to give at home, but they don’t make too much. Too much money is not good for kids. They will start to develop desires for all these goods in the bazaar. They will want to buy fancy clothes, they will want to eat in hotels. They will blow their money on useless things. I have seen this happen with the boys who do guiding. All they want is a luxurious life.”

Thus, by working in this male-dominated public space, the girls on the riverfront indexed the impact of foreign tourism and the way it was generating new kinds of socioeconomic relations and concerns for people in the city. However, through the restrictions imposed upon them, and through their own efforts to portray themselves in a positive light, the girls also testified to the capacity of people in Dasashwamedh to reproduce cultural meanings and values that provided their lives with some sense of familiarity and order. As will be seen in the rest of this chapter, this stood in marked contrast to the boys.

**The Dangers of Dalali**

Like Anand, most people in Dasashwamedh emphasized the multiple dangers associated with guiding and commission work (*dalali*) and the “bad” and “barren” money that it yielded. As I was repeatedly told: “The money these boys make from foreign tourists is bad money” (*galat paisa*). “It never sticks” (*nahin tikta hai*). “It cannot be digested by anyone” (*kisi se nahin pachta hai*). “It will not reap any fruit” (*nahin phalta hai*). “It is ‘cheating’ money” (*cheating ka paisa*). “It is wicked money” (*haram ka paisa*). “One way or another it must be spent!” (*kisi na kisi rasta usko karch me kiya jaaega!*). Anthropologists have observed that conceptions of bad, barren, and even magic money tend to develop in situations where the
pursuit of commercial profit is perceived as undermining traditional values and ways of life. What interests me here, however, are not the just the cross-cultural comparisons that these responses invite but also the culturally and historically specific significance that such claims took on for people in Dasashwamedh.

**Sin, Pollution, and Contagion**

The *dalal*, or commission/brokerage agent, has surfaced as a rather suspect and even despised figure in other anthropological and historical accounts of South Asia. Both van der Veer (1985) and Parry (1994) have noted some of the general criticisms that surround agents operating in the pilgrimage industries in Ayodhya and Banaras, respectively. Likewise, Chakrabarty has pointed out that during the 1930s, in the jute mill industry of Bengal, the *dalal* evoked such hostility that the word itself became a “working-class term of abuse” to be applied to those who represented the interests of the employer (Chakrabarty 1989, 122–123).

Although far from exhaustive, therefore, there is some evidence to suggest that within other Indian contexts, as well, engaging in commission work has been viewed as a potentially degrading if not unscrupulous occupation. However, for people in Dasashwamedh, this work and money went beyond degrading. It was regarded as morally problematic.

One explanation for this, which can be quickly discounted, was the illegal status of the boys’ work. Unlicensed guiding in Banaras was and still is illegal, and all of the boys had stories and complaints about being harassed by the police. Although this certainly exacerbated the perception that unlicensed guiding was not a particularly prestigious way to earn a living, for both the boys and onlookers in the neighborhood it by no means provided the foundation for raising moral objections. For instance, even in cases where boys did earn commissions off of the sale of illegal drugs (which most of them claimed not to do), the criticisms focused on other aspects that were believed to make this kind of activity morally wrong and dangerous. As Mohan explained in our interview: “I never think that I should eat [use] bad money. It is absolute poison (*bilkul zahr hai*). If I sell poison then the parents of these foreigners will be sad that their son is bad, his soul will attach to me (*uski atma, matlab hamare par lagega*). This is why I won’t do any bad work for money. I can do everything, I know all about everything, but I will never think about it.” Or as Bali remarked when also explaining why he refused to sell drugs to foreign tourists: “We do the work of guiding but even we have some sense of humanity inside of us. That’s bad money. Because if you sell drugs then some else's life will become bad. It will cause problems for his family, the tourist’s family. And his family will lament the situation and their grief will strike me (*to unka aah ham ko lagega*) and since their grief will come to me, then if I use that money at home then it will also affect my family members and both me and my family members will have to suffer.”
When it came to eliciting moral outrage, therefore, condemnations typically stemmed from, or at least, were articulated in terms of, the way guiding/commission work was perceived as exposing the boys and their families to various forms of sin, pollution, and contagious substances. Mohan and Bali’s comments draw us back into some very familiar ethnographic findings regarding Hindu notions of karmic retribution (Babb 1983; S. Daniel 1983; V. Daniel 1983, 1984; Wadley and Der 1990), the idea that persons and their acts are not entirely separable (Daniel 1984; Marriott 1976), the reliance upon biological models of digestive malfunction to express forms of irregular exchange (Parry 1994, 214), and the belief that sin and inauspiciousness are transmittable among people in the family line, or among “one’s own” (apna) (Raheja 1988).

One of the most common objections stemmed from the perception that guiding was a highly polluting form of work. It required these boys to closely interact with foreigners, who were perceived as both morally lax and physically dirty. Throughout my fieldwork I heard people in Dasashwamedh speak with visceral disgust about the way foreign tourists wiped their behinds with toilet paper or kept dirty tissues in their pockets. To recall Gappa’s comments: “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. People think Angreze are dirty.” Or, as Mr. Joshi noted, “When backpackers started coming to Banaras and I opened my guest house people were very concerned about having these ‘dirty foreigners’ so close to their sacred sites!”

If the physical dirtiness of foreigners evoked such strong reactions and concerns, this is also because Hindu conceptions of the person do not posit sharp distinctions between physical impurities and moral ones; in many cases, they are viewed as indexical of each other. Furthermore, because the person is conceptualized as a more “fluid” “dividual” who is continually made and remade through their interactions with others, these impurities are regarded as potentially contagious (Daniel 1984; Lamb 2000; Marriott 1990; Wadley and Der 1990). Indeed, one of the practices that most disturbed people in Dasashwamedh was the way tourists seemed to flagrantly disregard any concern with contaminating and contagious substances by sharing drinks with each other or eating each other’s jhutha (contaminated) food. In fact, there were several occasions when I was on hand to hear Devika sternly warn Mohan against adopting such practices: “I know some of those boys on the ghats drink jhutha wali cokes from tourists. I better not find out that you are!”

**Not Real Work**

Another recurring charge was that guiding was merely a form of “loafing” and as such, the money it engendered was inferior to “the money of hard work.” For instance, echoing sentiments I heard many times over, Anand remarked:
“Consider this work absolutely useless because this is not money that is earned by working hard (mehnat ka paisa). They do not work hard and get this money. It is only money that is earned by roaming around and wandering like loafers.” Or as Rahul, himself a former guide, remarked: “These children are earning money but they also spend it on wasteful things, because if one earns money in a useless way, then one will spend it in a useless way (jaisa phaltu kamae to phaltu karch karenge). If they earned money by hard work, (mehnat se), say 100 rupees, then they would be afraid to spend even 10 rupees.”

Similar distinctions have been documented by both Parry and Gloria Raheja. They have pointed out that the money procured from the unreciprocated gift of dan is frequently contrasted with the superior money of hard work, and is viewed as unlikely to yield any productive returns (Parry 1994; Raheja 1988). This comparative data might lead us to conclude that the moral opprobrium surrounding the proceeds of guiding/dalali derived from more general concerns about “negative reciprocity” (Sahlins 1972). However, the idea that these boys were basically getting something for nothing was not, I argue, the sole or even primary source of moral rebuke. For many people, an equally troubling issue, even if it was not necessarily a conscious one, was that these boys seemed to be challenging the very category of work, and more specifically, of what constituted appropriate work for people of their class and caste background. Sporting “fancy” clothes and chaperoning tourists through the bazaar, often sharing meals and movies with them, seemed a far cry from the work world of the ghats, where Mallah livelihoods were still secured through calloused hands and physical labor.

**Ill-gotten Money**

Moral condemnations also stemmed from the perception that guiding/commission work was fundamentally a form of cheating. For instance, in my interview with Vinod and Rohit, two of the retired guides in Dasashwamedh, I encountered responses that I heard many times over in the course of my research:

**VY:** What will one do with that money? He will drink, smoke, go to the cinema, go to prostitutes, what else will he do?

**JH:** It’s possible that he will save his money and build a house. . . .

**VY:** He won’t save it. That money won’t be saved because it is cheating money. He won’t be able to (nahin rakh payega).

**JH:** Why?

**VY:** Because it’s wicked money (haram ka paisa).

**RS:** One way or another that money will find a way to leave this guy, it will disappear (kisi na kisi rasta voh chala jaega).

**VY:** Or someone will fall sick at home, or there will be an accident, or the police will catch him. That money simply has to leave him.
In this dialogue, it is not so much the concept of cheating that is elaborated as the consequences. Illegitimate money bears no fruit. It cannot, as Parry has noted in regard to the proceeds of mortuary dan, which are given to the Mahabrahman funeral priests, be “productively re-invested” (Parry 1989, 69). As I was told on many occasions: “If one earns money in the wrong way, then he will spend it in the wrong way” (galat se kamaen to galat karch karega). Once again, therefore, these remarks highlight some culturally pervasive ideas regarding understandings of sin, its circulation, and the way that the money itself can transmit negative qualities and emerge as much more than just a homogenous exchange value. However, people in Dasashwamedh also elaborated understandings of cheating that invoked other cultural concerns and idioms.

Some people explained that guiding was a form of cheating because it was predicated upon lies and deceit. In the first instance, tourists were usually led to believe that these boys were interested in establishing friendships with them, when in reality they were concerned with doing business. It was also pointed out that tourists were coaxed into paying high prices for relatively worthless goods. As Gopal Sahani, age sixteen, explained to me in a tone that mixed both pride and defensiveness: “Even if something is useless we will say to the customer that it is good, that is why it is called cheating. For example, we will sell something worthless for 500 rupees and tourists will bring it back to their countries and show it to people and say ‘Look at this nice stuff’ and someone else will say ‘This isn’t good stuff, it’s worthless,’ that’s why we are called cheaters. But even the guys working in this line have to earn, they have to feed themselves” (unko bhi kamana, unko bhi pet dekhna hai).

Although cheating and lying were both condemned, they did not reflect a categorical moral imperative around which people lived and evaluated their actions. Indeed, many of the boys pointed out that the “right to earn a livelihood,” to “fill the stomach,” trumped the means by which this was accomplished. For example, as Pramod commented: “If I am cheating you in the name of business then it’s not bad work (agar mai dhandha ke marfat me apko cheating kar raha hoon to galat kam nahin hai). If I even tell you a hundred lies for business then God will never be angry with me because it’s my business, my livelihood. Because if I don’t tell lies then I won’t earn anything, how will I eat? It’s very necessary for me to tell lies. It’s not just me, it’s like this for any businessman.”

Within Hindu India, what is considered right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, is often contextually determined and predicated upon one’s position and station in life rather than decreed by a set of moral universals (Vatuk 1990). There are clearly defined stages and spaces where the self-interested pursuit of business is both culturally sanctioned and expected. While Western societies (and scholars) still tend to draw romanticizing distinctions between the virtues of gift exchange and immorality of commerce, this is not necessarily the case.
elsewhere. Parry himself arrives at a similar conclusion in his study of the mortuary industry: “Neither in the Banaras of my informants, nor in the tradition at large, is the normal run of commercial profit seen as a particular ethical problem. . . . It is not business in general, but the business of death, which is morally loaded” (Parry 1994, 130). To substantiate this claim, Parry provides an example of a young man who worked as a guide/commission agent with foreign tourists:

The point was brought home to me by the case of a young man I knew well, whose family owns one of the shops which specializes in the sale of “goods of the skull-breaking.” Most of the time he himself works as one of Banaras’s numerous commission agents (dalals) or “guides,” showing foreign tourists around the city and taking a cut on any purchase they can be persuaded to make. These sometimes include narcotics, and one day I met Bhola in a jubilant mood after he had made a very considerable sum on a sale of morphine. Despite the fact that he had many times told of the terrible misfortunes his family have suffered as a result of selling the goods required for cremation, he denies any qualms about transactions such as these. (Parry 1994, 131)

Parry’s example does not mark an isolated case, for I also knew boys who had few qualms about selling drugs, and I knew many like Pramod who defended guiding and commission work as a valid, although not necessarily honorable, way to earn money. However, as the examples above make clear, and as the ones below will further demonstrate, there were many people in Dasashwamedh who did find this work and money morally problematic, and again, the question is why?

More than Necessary

The reason, I suggest, is because the boys’ participation in this informal tourist economy was not perceived as “the normal run of commercial profit.” Rather, for many people in the neighborhood the boys’ work with foreign tourists represented a way of earning and spending that seemed incompatible with more pervasive cultural understandings of social life, roles, and relations. As Soni Yadav remarked:

SY: It is not wrong to take a commission, what is wrong is to take more than necessary (zarurat se zyada lena) like the kids of today do.

JH: So how can you decide what “more than necessary” means?

SY: “More than necessary” means this. Suppose I helped you buy this scarf for 50 rupees and I will get 5 rupees as my commission from this and I should be happy with that. But suppose I persuaded you to buy this scarf for 250 rupees, then I’ll end up making 60 rupees from that and if you happen to
go to some other shop or market and you find out that you could buy the same scarf for 60 rupees there then you will come back to me and say to me, “Soni, you aren’t a good man. You have cheated me.” So all of the love and talk it’s all finished. So I took commission and I still do but in an honest manner (imandar ka khata hoon).

Like Soni, many people in the neighborhood, criticized the boys for their short-sightedness and seemingly unbridled self-interest. Rather than trying to build and sustain productive relationships with customers in the future, the boys (like the Mahabrahman funeral priests) were often castigated for being excessively rapacious and for trying “to suck every rupee out of the tourist” before he or she left. Considering the fact that most tourists do not return to Banaras for second visits, from a pragmatic standpoint such concerns might seem misplaced. However, when I would point this out to people in the neighborhood, they usually replied: “Look, Jenny! One bad fish dirties the whole pond!” “People will hear about how these boys treat tourists, they will hear that we are cheaters and in the future all the tourists will stop coming to Banaras. Then we will all suffer.” Thus, the boys’ “cheating” also elicited concern because they were perceived as jeopardizing “everyone’s right to earn.”

The most common concern, however, stemmed from the perception that these boys were actually earning too much money. Throughout my research I was repeatedly told, “There is no limit in this work (is kam mein koi seema nahin hoti hai). When one dollar is equal to forty-five rupees of course the children will be able to charge so much, and the tourists also will be willing to pay so much because they know that for them it is little but for the children it is a lot.” This was particularly problematic because people in Dasashwamedh placed tremendous emphasis on spending and living in accordance with one’s capacity or means (auqaat ke hisab karna chayiye). They frequently suggested that the transient prosperity the boys experienced by working with foreign tourists had caused them to lose sight of their real economic position. As Diraj noted, “These boys earn money from tourists and they forget what their capacity is” (yeh larke tourists se paisa kamate hain aur apna auqaat bhool jaate hain). Or as Bali remarked: “When these boys begin to earn money from foreigners they start to spend beyond their means (jab yeh larke pasie kamane lagte hain videhshiyon se to apne auqaat se zyada karch karne lagte hain). They start buying fancy clothes. They start eating in restaurants. They want very expensive things.” Thus, when it came to assessing the boys’ participation in this informal economy, discourses about illicit and inappropriate earnings quickly gave way to discourses about inappropriate forms of spending, leisure, and consumption. Indeed, in certain respects, people in Dasashwamedh were far more concerned with how the boys actually spent their money (and leisure time), than with how they earned it.
The Joy of Life

In her wonderful ethnography, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880–1986*, Nita Kumar describes the central role that leisure practices play in organizing the cultural system of Banarsipan among lower-class males. As she writes:

Banarsipan is a way of life that can best be understood by describing the activities it encompasses. . . . It can also be summed up in its essential features of simplicity, carefreeness, contentment, and a love of certain “Banarasi” things such as natural beauty, darshan, pan, *bhang* (an intoxicant), and *malai* (cream). . . . Most of all, Banaras is special and superior to other places because its people are not enslaved by work, do not care about money or hoarding it, and certainly do not like to be dominated by getting involved with *naukri* (service) and *tankhwah* (salaries). They are devoted to leisure: music, melas, processions, celebrations, wrestling, bathing, *bhang*, and going to *bahri alang*. (Kumar 1988, 82)

The central tenets of this “Banarasi” way of life were actively embraced by the boys who worked on the riverfront. As I discussed earlier, many of the boys said that they preferred to work as guides precisely because it enabled them to be their own masters, enjoy the manifold pleasures of the city, and “spend like kings.” However, according to many people in the neighborhood, the boys’ leisure activities did not represent a culturally lauded expression of Banarsipan, which was premised upon a carefree attitude toward money and wealth. Instead, their spending and consumption in the bazaar seemed to suggest that their pursuits, as well as conceptions of the good life, were significantly changing. For instance, as Harsha’s father Ashish remarked when I asked him to compare his own childhood with his son’s:

Today these boys just want money, because their expenses have increased tremendously. For instance, earlier we did not know the meaning of a [in English] “hotel” or what this word meant. Today there are hotels on every street. People go to eat in hotels, and there it costs at least 150 or 200 rupees for four people to eat in a hotel, and in our time we friends used to get together and go to the ghats, and we used to go to the river and cook food ourselves. So we used to make a program to eat outside, we used to go somewhere far from our home, to cook there and eat there and just to have fun. Today these kids do the same thing just in hotels. But you won’t get the same pure atmosphere in the hotels as you get on the ghats. Outside, you take a bath in the Ganga and after bathing you eat and then relax. This is the intoxication/joy of living in Banaras (*yeh to Banaras mein rahene ki masti hai*).
Ashish’s account of the “program” provides a vivid example of bahri alang. Literally translated, bahri, which derives from baahar, meaning “outside,” and alang, which translates as “portion or side,” bahri alang jaana is the activity of going out. However, as Kumar explains, bahri alang is also a “matter of mood, time, and a ritualized pattern of activities” that are geared toward revitalizing the body and mind. To “go out” is to escape the crowds, congestion, and “busy life of men” in the city and it is to indulge in the “fresh,” “free,” and purifying elements of nature and open space (Kumar 1988, 90). As a matter of mood, bahri alang represents “the way of feeling that . . . is taken by Banarasis to be characteristic of them in general: mauj, or masti” (Kumar 1988, 99). According to Kumar, intellectuals talk about masti as a “philosophy of pleasure” or “science of life” that informs people’s actions and orientation to the world. However, among “ordinary folk,” she observes that masti is described as the product of certain pleasurable practices and spaces. “Mauj masti is the sense of freedom and contentment that comes from the maalish (oil massage) and snaan (bath), the exercise, the safu-pani, the bhang, and the outdoors . . . it means to feel on top of the world, and also to feel intoxicated” (Kumar 1988, 99).

Although Kumar proposes that these two ways of conceptualizing masti reflect a difference between “intellectuals” and “ordinary folk,” in Ashish’s account both are invoked. Ashish construed masti as an orientation to the world and as the emotional and physical product of a particular kind of praxis, and the tensions between these two understandings generated uncertainties for him: Were these boys who worked in the foreign tourism line simply transposing a traditional cultural logic or “philosophy of pleasure” onto a different set of spaces and consumptive practices, that is, did hotel parties represent a new manifestation of the traditional “outside program”? Or, did this reorientation from the riverfront to the bazaar entail significant differences?

**An Unwholesome Life of Luxury**

Ashish and others were ambivalent about the answers to these questions. However, many people in Dasashwamedh asserted that it was not the joy of life that was driving these boys from the riverfront into the bazaar, but rather, it was aiyaashi, the love of luxury and comfort. The goods and fantasies produced in the market had seduced these boys away from the more “wholesome,” simple, and nourishing pleasures of the riverfront and the home. For instance, Kailash liked to spend his earnings dining in restaurants where he could order his favorite dish, shahi paneer (which literally translates as royal or kingly cheese). However, as Kailash himself noted, the excessive oil and spice that was used to make this food so “tasty” was detrimental to his health: “It is bad for us to eat in hotels. It is bad for our bodies. They put too much spice and too much oil in
the food to make it more tasty.” Or as Arun Yadav (age twelve), who also sold postcards at Dasashwamedh, remarked in our interview:

AY: Many kinds of goods have come into Banaras so that boys will eat them and get sick.
JH: For example, what will you get sick from eating?
AY: For instance, if a man opens a shop near a drain and it is a sweet shop and he has any kind of sweets and it’s near the drain then those worms that are in the drain go and sit in the shop. So a man just sees the shop and thinks it’s a good shop but he doesn’t know what happens, he doesn’t know what really happens in the sweet shop.

In both of these remarks, the tempting yet dangerous food from the bazaar may be read as a metaphor for the bazaar itself. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested, in India, the bazaar represents an inherently ambiguous space: viewed as a site of both pleasure and peril, it is ultimately “a place against which one needs protection” (Chakrabarty 1991, 25). Not only was bazaar food regarded as harmful to the boys’ physical health, as Kailash and Arun proposed, but it also was perceived as loaded with potential social and moral dangers. In Hindu culture, food provides one of the central conduits through which the qualities and affections of a person may pass. Consequently, to consume food that has been prepared by a stranger exposes one to receiving potentially inferior or incompatible substances, while to consume food made by one’s own (apna) is to share in their substance and increase the bonds of solidarity between giver and receiver.

Moreover, as Chakrabarty has also noted, within India, the home and sphere of domesticity, which is so often signified by women at the hearth, is still frequently valued as the true center of vitality and nourishment. Therefore, when people in Dasashwamedh criticized these boys for eating in the bazaar, or expressed concerns about harmful bazaar food that “did not stick” or satisfy, they also reinscribed a pervasive cultural ideology that posited the primacy of the domestic over the commercial or public sphere. For example, as Bali remarked: “The food from outside does not stick to the body. If you eat four rotis outside they will not stick, if they are made by hand they will.” Or, as Aashaa (age thirteen), one of the girls who occasionally sold tea on the ghats, commented: “Look, if you eat outside every day, then of course the food will not be taken into your body (nahin lagega sharir mein). Of course, once in a while if you don’t have time to make food at home then you can eat outside and that’s perfectly okay, and that food will be taken into your body. But if you think, ‘I’m not going to eat at home even though food is being made there, I’m going to eat outside,’ then of course, that grain won’t stick to your body.”

Thus, boys who regularly ate in the bazaar became signs that social roles and relations within the home were fundamentally askew: they spoke of parents who were unable or unwilling to provide for their offspring, and they also
conjured up images of defiant children who refused to be contained by the rules and expectations of their elders. Indeed, the boys themselves were extremely cognizant of this. In most cases, even on days when they had eaten out in restaurants with friends or tourists, they made sure to save enough room to be able to eat some food at home. As Harsha remarked, “Even if I eat out with my friends I make sure to go and eat some food at home. If I don’t eat, my mother gets very upset, she thinks the love between us is finished.”

The idea that the bazaar tempted these boys with a “rich” lifestyle that was actually far from enriching was reiterated in many ways. Rani Goswami, who ran the bead kiosk on the main road above Dasashwamedh Ghat, observed:

Children before used to pay a lot of attention to physical exercise, they were always playing on the ghats, swimming, they were strong. But the children who work with tourists today are not like this, they earn money, they wander around in the bazaar, they go see movies and after seeing them they simply believe that they are movie stars. They want to live in that style. They are always wearing [in English] “first-class jeans and t-shirts.” They want to be comfortable, they want to eat everything in the bazaar and not work too hard. This is what they like.

Similarly, Tulu, whose eleven-year-old son worked as a guide, remarked:

These boys are definitely much farther ahead when it comes to fashion. Back in my days there was no fashion, or fashion consciousness. The fashion consciousness and the imitation (naqal) that you see today through movies was not there. For example, if a hero or heroine dress a certain way in a movie, then the next day that very same model of dress will arrive in the marketplace and all these children will want it. A big difference has come into the lifestyle now. Today, if you take these boys to the village area or the rural society they will not enjoy being there. And as for us, even today if you take us to a village we will enjoy being there.

In both of these accounts the boys’ consumptive practices were cast as a form of mimicry, and the market was identified as the primary site in which their desires were produced and pursued. The fantasy world of Bollywood, not the riverfront of Banaras, was seen as providing the model of the “good life,” and the boys’ bodies were disparaged as mere sign vehicles that expressed the fluctuations of fashion rather than the enriching effects of exercise and healthy living. In Tulu’s assessment, these cosmetic transformations and imaginative reorientations bespoke significant internal differences as well; the boys had lost their capacities to enjoy the quintessential pleasures of India. In such commentaries, therefore, the movement from the riverfront to the bazaar, and from masti to aiyaashi, reinstated a commonly espoused meta-narrative of Indian modernity that lamented the loss of traditional values and ways of life.
In other instances, however, people questioned what the boys’ newfound love of luxury would lead to in the future. For instance, Rana was the father of Mohan and Jaggu, and he worked as a low-paid and low-ranking attendant in a government sari shop near Lanka. Usually he was at work when I made my regular Saturday visits to eat kitchery with his wife Devika and daughter Bharati. However, on the few occasions when he did stay home, we had lengthy conversations, and before I left Banaras he agreed to set some time aside for me to interview him. On the designated afternoon, I arrived with my tape recorder. Rana, Mohan, and I sat together on the bed while Devika and Bharati sat by the gas cylinder on the floor making tea. After hearing Rana narrate his own life story, I asked him what he thought about the work that his sons did with foreign tourists. In an impassioned outburst, which subsequently made Mohan blush with embarrassment and tears, Rana replied:

If they had jobs where they had to sit in a shop all day, or be supervised, then they would not be able to go around and eat all these things in the bazaar, spend their money on “fancy pant-shirts” and go to the movies. These boys just want a life of luxury and comfort (aish araam ki zindagi chaahte hain). They do not know about work or study. Since the day my son bought these pant-shirts he has become crazy. The boy whose mind is focused on studies or work does not care for pant-shirts! [Giving Mohan a slap to the head] You should see this boy powdering his face before he goes out now, cleaning his shoes and clothes, always looking at himself. Combing his hair all the time, wandering around in the bazaar and acting like a “hero”! Where is this going to get him?

Rana’s volatile reaction was, I suspect, in part linked to his own frustrations and failed aspirations. Rana hated working in the sari shop and despised the tedium of his days. As he told me on more than one occasion, had his life been different, he would have chosen to be a “scholar.” Moreover, his inability to financially provide for his family did grate on his self-esteem, especially when Devika belittled him. On many occasions when I spoke with Devika, she explained, or rather complained: “If my husband wasn’t so weak, if he could do more than work as a servant in a government shop and earn more than a thousand rupees a month, then these boys would not have to work. It is because he is weak that they are on the ghats. If they didn’t do this work then what would we eat?” However, although Rana’s response was certainly animated by a set of personal frustrations, it echoed widely shared concerns among people in the neighborhood. When Rana surveyed his son’s spendthrift practices in the bazaar, he did not see evidence of masti or a “carefree attitude” toward money and wealth, but rather he saw troubling signs of fixation.
Dangerous Addictions and Dark Futures

Indeed, some of the most vehement critiques of the boys’ spending and consumption practices explicitly drew upon idioms of addiction. In many local accounts, the figure of the aishebaaz, or pleasure seeker, quickly gave way to the figure of the addict, nashebaaz. As Avi Sahani remarked: “Look, children get ruined (bigar jaate hain) from doing this tourist work. They earn too much money in this line and then they begin spending it in the bazaar. They eat bad foods in restaurants. They buy fancy clothes. They see too many movies. They become addicted to money and drugs. They develop a greed for these things. But when they become bigger and the tourists don’t love them anymore, and they don’t get so much money, then what will they do? They will still be longing for all these things. Then what will they do?” Or, as Rahul remarked when reflecting upon his own experiences as a child guide:

In my childhood I saw so much money, tourists gave me so much money. I earned so much, that the greed that was inside of me, it came to the surface (hamare jo andar se lobh tha, voh upar ho gaya). After doing this work, these children’s hunger increases (bukh barh jaati hai). They get greedy for things. They start using bad things, wasting their money, they gamble, use drugs. It is all very bad. And then, suppose tomorrow they have no money for these things, then they will really feel a lot of anguish. Maybe they will do some kind of bad work to get money for these things.17

The problem, therefore, was not only that these boys were challenging traditional conceptions of the good life. People in Dasashwamedh also worried that their newfound lifestyles and seemingly insatiable consumption would render them, and potentially their families, unfit for any kind of productive future. As Devika remarked one afternoon when we were discussing her son’s involvement with guiding and commission work, “Sons are our walking sticks in old age. If they break, so will we.”

Conclusion: Transactional (Dis)orders

If the boys’ participation in this informal economy elicited so much more concern from people in Dasashwamedh than that of the girls, and if their earnings were far more apt to be symbolically elaborated as bad or barren money, this is because, as Parry and Bloch astutely note: “The symbolism of money is only one aspect of a more general symbolic world of transactions which must always come to terms with some fundamental human problems. One of these is the relationship between the individual human life and a symbolically constructed image of the enduring social and cosmic order within which that life is lived” (Parry and Bloch 1989, 28). In exploring the way that money “is symbolically
represented in a range of different societies,” Parry and Bloch argue that under-
neath this incredible diversity there is also “a unity” to be found which stems
from “the totality of transactions” that “form a general pattern which is part of
the reproduction of social and ideological systems concerned with a time-scale
far longer than the individual human life” (1). As they argue, all societies must
symbolically resolve the tension between “a short-term transactional order,”
which typically provides a sanctioned space for “individual appropriation, com-
petition, sensuous enjoyment, luxury and youthful vitality” (24), and “a long-
term transactional order,” which is oriented around reproducing the social and
moral values of the collective.

Although these two orders share a necessary relationship with each other,
Parry and Bloch observe that usually the short-term transactional order is mor-
ally underdetermined, while the long-term cycle is “positively associated with
the central precepts of morality” (Parry and Bloch 1989).18 Therefore, when
individual or short-term transactions are seen as reinforcing the tenets of the
long-term cycle (or rather, when money accrued in the short-term transactional
order is transformed through “symbolic operations” into the long-term order),
they often become morally valorized. When “the opposite possibility” prevails,
however, “this evokes the strongest censure.” As they argue, it conjures up “the
possibility that individual involvement in the short-term cycle will become an
end in itself which is no longer subordinated to the reproduction of the larger
cycle; or more horrifying still, that grasping individuals will divert the resources
of the long-term cycle for their own short-term transactions” (26–27).

When people in Dasashwamedh reflected upon the children who partici-
pated in this informal tourist economy, and when they symbolically elaborated
the money that they earned, spent, and saved, they suggested that both of these
possibilities were playing out, albeit along gendered lines. By relinquishing
their earnings to their parents and curbing their personal expenditures and
consumption, the girls established themselves as virtuous subjects who were
seen as adhering to and perpetuating the moral order of society. That is, the
girls were praised for putting others’ interests and traditionally valued ways of
life before their individual aspirations or desires.

The boys, however, did evoke “the strongest censure” and, as we have seen,
the criticism and concerns that they and their earnings generated were cul-
turally elaborated in multiple ways. In some cases, the moral condemnation
stemmed from the perception that the boys were violating traditional logics
of production or engaging in dishonorable, illicit, or impure work. In other
cases, the concerns centered more on their lives as consumers. However,
whether articulated in terms of production or consumption, when it came to
the boys, people suggested that the short-term cycle had “become an end itself.”
The boys’ behavior and actions were perceived as challenging a “general set
of ideas regarding the place of the individual” in the larger social and cosmic order (Parry and Bloch 1989) and, instead of working to symbolically resolve the tensions between these two orders, as the girls did, the boys were seen as undermining any kind of harmonious relationship between the two. Anand’s warning, issued at the outset of this chapter, captures this fear vividly: “These boys loaf around and have fun, but their futures will be dark. No one can digest the money earned in the tourist line. When these boys die they will not even have money for a shroud, they will be cremated without one. This is the meaning of the guiding line.”