



Life

● ENVIRONMENT ● PHILOSOPHY ● HEROES ● SCIENCE ● TRAVEL ● PARANORMAL ● SPORTS

THE DAILY GOLD RUSH

THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH MAY ONLY HAVE LASTED ABOUT 10 YEARS, BUT FOR THE *NEHARAWALAS* IN KOLKATA, IT'S AN EVERYDAY ROUTINE ALONG THE STREET DRAIN OF BOWBAZAR. **SNEHANGSHU ADHIKARI** CATCHES UP WITH THE 'GOLD DIGGERS...





Ours is a nation of gold lovers. And it is no more apparent than in Bowbazar in the heart of Kolkata. No lady, proceeding to catch the homeward bound local from the nearby Sealdah station, has walked past this shopping hub without casting a glance at that topaz-studded golden teardrop earrings in the Basak Jewellers display, or the twisting-rope hinged bracelet at Laxmi Narayan Jewellers, or that luscious floral-pattern necklace beckoning from the Bangalaxmi Jewellers' window. Gold is not only the ornament for occasions, but also an investment for the family and its future.

Imran Khan understands this fetish for the yellow metal well enough. And he's hooked too. At the age of seven, Imran had boarded a train from Agra with his father. Little did he know then that the City of Joy and her Bowbazar would become a way of life for him, just as it was with his father and grandfather. Imran prays for his hands to touch gold everyday. He, like his forebears, is a *Neharawala* who bides his time near the drain linking the jewellery shops in Bowbazar, hoping to waylay any and every particle of gold dust that escapes the 'golden' precincts.

Each day, early in the morning, Imran takes the local train from Tikiapara to Howrah and then rushes down to a tiny rented room at Mechua market, where he meets Abdul Jabbar, Mujibar Malik, Mohammad Taha and Shoib Noor. After a hurried course of steamed rice and

potatoes, these six young men start off on their daily 'Gold Rush'.

Armed with a pan, broom and sieve, these men begin their scrutiny by, first, sweeping dust into the drain, and then running their sieves through the filthy water with practiced hands. Their eyes have a way of spotting the golden glow which, once discerned, is carefully kept aside. Do they really find gold in that filth? Of course they do. What else can lure more than 300 men each morning towards Bowbazar? "My father was the first one in my family to do this," recalls Abdul Jabbar. "We're doing it for the last 70 years; now my son has also joined in." Even though he was talking to us, his hands and eyes were deep in concentration at work. Surprisingly, he didn't even blink once – so typical of jewellers' eyes! This job keeps them occupied throughout the year, though the best season is between October and March (with *Laxmi Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Biswakarma Puja* and the wedding season), when gold handling and transactions hit a fever pitch. Just like any other trade, networking pays as the workers inside the shops also do their bit by ensuring that on cleaning days, like the day before *Biswakarma Puja*, nothing is thrown away, not even the water. The *Neharawalas* thus have little

IMRAN PRAYS FOR HIS HANDS TO TOUCH GOLD EVERYDAY

to fret over sharing a part of their 'discovery' income with the workers.

The gold dust, collected from the drain, goes to Howrah for further distillations using acid and mercury. Then again, as the cliché goes, all that glitters is not gold. Jabbar laments, "Business is slow, *babu*. Not so long ago, a sum like Rs 300-400 per day was very easy. But now, one considers himself lucky if he

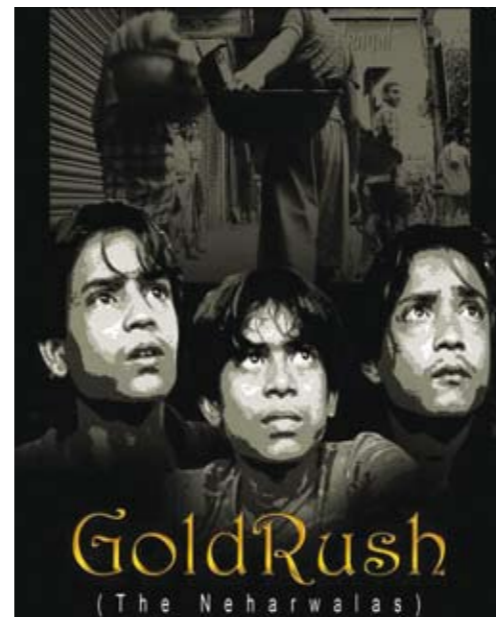


PHOTO: IRANA PATRA

can touch Rs 100 per day." Now, the *Neharawalas* manage at best 500 mg of gold grain each day, quite a fall from 1-2 g (around Rs 7000 monthly) a few years back. With prices skyrocketing each day, demand for gold has also taken a hit as Kolkata's Bengalis and non-Bengalis increasingly take to silver and other gemstones over gold. Yet, the hard times and limited options of livelihood have sucked in more *Neharawala* children than would have fancied this lynx-eyed quest.

It is their tenacity that compelled Raja Dey (see

'The Goldsmith') to film the *Neharawalas* of Bowbazar. After the first phase of shooting, Mr. Dey had asked them if they would like some remuneration to which Imran had replied, "We don't want money. But it'll be nice if you can arrange some *chai-biskut* for us. But *babu*, can the shooting be wrapped up a bit early? It's tough to concentrate if the shooting goes on." Then, with a smile, Imran, Jabbar and his friends had gone back to their 'concentration bank' – their very own El Dorado in the bowels of the city. **ISI**

THE GOLDSMITH

Raja Dey is not new to the documentary arena. The maker of "Mr. & Mrs. Goswami: The Bahurupies" (2008) and "The Band Party: Bajate Raho" (2008), he debuted a little over a year back with a docudrama named "Tamanna" on the subject of female infanticide in rural India, and went on to work as cinematographer with Francisco Bello, for the 2008 Oscar-nominated "Salim Baba". Raja's latest film "Gold Rush: The Neharawalas" screened on 6th October in Magnolia Hall, Forli, Italy during the 6th Sedicorto International Film Festival, where the jury decided to award "Gold Rush..." a special mention in the D/O/C Documentary section.

Why a film like "Gold Rush: The Neharawalas"?

You can say it was a sudden attempt. For a long time we are staying in Kolkata, but before 2005, I never knew about the *Neharawalas*. I used to think they were the rag-pickers. Who would believe that one hopes to live off finding gold in the street drains of Bowbazar. Since I got to know about them, I was thrilled enough to plan a movie on them.

We tried to find out the process by which they distill gold, but it is supposed to be a secret that we were never let in on. That was disappointing, but after having a good time with them, I realised fully that Bowbazar is like their dreamland. They are most comfortable in this profession.

The movie plan came in 2005, then why wait until 2008 to film it?

Actually, the situation was totally out of my control. In 2005, I started shoot with three teens from Agra. Everything was quite okay, but suddenly all of them vanished, I've no clue where! I became totally depressed at that point of time. I resumed my project in 2008 when I got three new guys; also from Agra.

Your choice of subjects – even "Mr. & Mrs. Goswami" and "Bajate Raho" – is inclined to the life struggles of the common man and his means of livelihood...

Look around yourself, the struggle for existence is everywhere. There are so many people like Mr. & Mrs. Goswami, Imran Khan, Yasin Anwar Hossain... Those who are very hard working and serious about what they do. Searching gold in dust is not just a fancy; it's their only source of income. You and I also have our very own struggles to contend with... It inspires me. **ISI**

