



Coin diver Om Prakash stands beneath the Iron Bridge in New Delhi, India, with his daughter, who is wearing a pair of angel wings that were pulled out of the river. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

# India's Coin Divers Know When Change Is in the Air

They Hunt for Treasure Tossed Into Holy River; Mostly Coins, Coconuts

By JESSE PESTA

NEW DELHI—Om Prakash remembers when more money used to fall out of the sky.

Today it's mostly small change—"one-rupee, two-rupee, five-rupee coins" he says, or basically a few cents—sometimes accompanied by coconuts. Once, though, a woman's gold ring came tumbling down.



Items collected under Iron Bridge

Mr. Prakash, 30 years old, lives and works beneath a historic bridge that spans the Yamuna

River in the heart of India's capital city. The Yamuna is one of India's most sacred rivers.

For Mr. Prakash, that means one thing: People throw valuables off the bridge as religious offerings. And Mr. Prakash and his friends collect them.

They paddle into the river on boats lashed together from junk, then use powerful magnets to sweep the river bottom. India's coins are magnetic, which is a good thing because the water isn't particularly clean. The divers will go in, though, in search of the good stuff.

"I don't remember the day I got the gold,

but there was a day...” Mr. Prakash says, his voice trailing off. Briefly lost in thought, he scratches his belly with a knife. His 6-year-old daughter plays nearby wearing a pair of angel’s wings that also came out of the river.

So much religious paraphernalia ends up in the Yamuna, in fact, that last month India’s environmental tribunal, as part of a broad cleanup initiative, set fines of 5,000 rupees, or about \$80, for tossing religious items into the water.

Mr. Prakash and his fellow coin divers are part of an unusual community beneath the Iron Bridge, an imposing, 150-year-old structure in the middle of a metropolis of some 16.8 million people. There are bicycle-rickshaw repairmen under the bridge, a few tea stalls, and one rose farmer. A couple dozen men who drive bullock-carts-for-hire relax in the shade, waiting for their cellphones to ring with the next job.

Nearby is a group that rescues cows. New Delhi has a well-documented problem with cows wandering the streets.

“People ring us up, saying, ‘There’s an

abandoned cow here,’ “ one of the workers explains. At least 100 formerly unwanted cows now graze by the bridge.

It’s “almost like a village in the middle of the city,” says Abdul Nassir, a clothes-washer near the water. “It’s a beautiful community.”

Up on the double-decker bridge, the Satyagrah Express, the Brahmaputra Mail and countless other trains rumble eastward daily. Pedestrians jostle for space with black-and-yellow taxis, rickshaws heaped with mysterious bales, and the occasional Audi.

And in the water below, next to Mr. Nassir, a buffalo is submerged up to its nostrils with a bird standing on its back.

The coin divers are the most famous locals, Mr. Nassir says. And the best one at the job, he says, is Raju Dash.

Mr. Dash walks up the riverbank and greets his mother, who is organizing coconuts outside the family’s small home. She collects and dries coconuts thrown into the river as offerings, then takes them to a company that makes oils for



Coin diver Raju Dash beneath the Iron Bridge, which spans the Yamuna River in the middle of New Delhi, India. PHOTO: JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

use in hair treatments.

This isn't a path to riches. Mr. Dash says he collects 500 rupees on a good day, or about \$8. He and his mother live in a house made out of an advertising banner covered with photos of holy men who aren't wearing clothes.

The best coin-hunting happens during rush hours. So as the sun climbs toward noon, five divers take a break in the shade of one of the bridge supports.

"Before, people used to throw real stuff—silver, gold. Now it's brass, aluminum," says Sunil Sheikh, 28 years old. "The times are rough."

India's economy has been weak for years, but the divers don't think that is the reason. "People aren't religious anymore," says Gajol Sheikh, who is no relation to Sunil.

Sunil Sheikh agrees. "Today, god is money. And the other god is mobile phones."

The men laugh when told that other people around the bridge call them famous. "People can say anything, that doesn't make us heroes," Mr. Prakash says.

However, the divers do mention that they rescue folks who fall into the river and can't swim.

The local police confirm it. "They sometimes save people," says Charan Singh, the head constable. Mr. Singh would be in a position to know. On his desk, tied neatly with a string, is a bundle of police files labeled "Dead Body Related Papers."

Back under the bridge, Mr. Prakash's young son Ravi plays with a three-legged, battery-operated cow (which came out of the river), then runs off to find his favorite toy, a car (which also came out of the river).

A few minutes later, Ravi comes running back. "It got sold!" he says.

One of the divers returns from a snack stall with two cups of tea. The men, sitting in a circle by the water, split the two teas five ways and talk about life.

Mr. Dash is married—"we met under the bridge," he says. He makes enough money that he also rents a small apartment nearby so his wife and two children don't have to stay under the bridge all the time. He learned coin-diving from his father, and hopes his own children will break the cycle.

Mr. Dash recalls a particularly good day, when he pulled 1,000 rupees out of the water. His friend Mr. Prakash, asked about his best day on the river, says, "That day hasn't come."

Suddenly, there is a "tink!" nearby—the unmistakable sound of metal striking rock. Could it be a coin hitting the riverbank?

All the divers hear it, and nobody budes.

"It's rust," one of the men says, explaining everyone's disinterest. The Iron Bridge coin divers know their business.

*Karan Deep Singh contributed to this article.*