



Headless (Clockwise from left) illegal sand mining at Chambal Bridge, Dholpur; a gharial on the riverbank; Indian skimmers with a mugger



that operations are organised by politically well-connected individuals. Over the past two decades, several instances of activists, journalists, and officers being harassed, assaulted or even killed for taking an anti-mining stand have been documented. Widespread local support and participation in illegal mining ensure that activists face an uphill task and considerable personal risk.

**Information blackholes**  
 "This is also why there is little political will to stop illegal mining or why it is seldom part of the 'promise package' to legalise sand mining and de-notify protected areas during election campaigns," says Nair. "In this case, the 'innocent local vs. evil outsider' dichotomy is false and does not reflect ground realities."

The Rajasthan government's recent decision to lease 60 sites across the State for 'legalised' sand mining is expected to come as some relief to protected areas. However, there is an information blackhole on details of these sites, which includes a lack of transparency on ecological assessments undertaken and made available in the public domain.

Such blanket clearances for projects set dangerous precedents, making statutory requirements mere formalities. Whether illegal sand mining will reduce remains to be seen, but the move serves as an invitation to imprudently destroy ecosystems without scrutiny. Further, since there are alternatives - and better ones at that - such as manufactured sand (M sand), which has seen increased uptake in some parts of the country, it makes legalised sand mining all the more questionable.

"The sand and construction mafia have already destroyed the Aravallis in Haryana and Rajasthan. Now, they are causing havoc in riverine ecosystems. The National Green Tribunal alone is our last hope to save the fragile habitat of the Chambal," says G.V. Reddy, former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Rajasthan.

While the legendary handouts of the Chambal have long turned over a new leaf, whether the sand mafia, spurred on by society's monstrous appetite for construction and real estate, will abandon their exploitative occupation and leave the Chambal to its wildlife is anybody's guess.

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Sahil Zutshi

**FIELD NOTES**

Illegal sand mining in the protected riverine area continues unabated, endangering several threatened species

# Digging up the Chambal

Along the periphery of Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan, Lal Singh counts sand-laden tractor-trolleys returning from the Chambal. "I watch this every day. What effect has the Supreme Court's ban on sand mining had?" asks Singh, a former wildlife guide.

The 200-strong convoy makes its way onto the Jaipur-Agra highway, from where a criss-crossing network of roads ensures the illegally mined sand reaches all corners of the region, the NCR, and further. "They mine day and night. Everybody is hand in glove with each other," Singh says, pointing towards the Chambal bridge near Dholpur, which forms the border between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and is the gateway to the Chambal River Safari.

Long believed to be cursed and born from the blood of a thousand animals according to mythological retellings, Chambal, once the haven of fearsome crocodiles, is today a meek witness to the massive ecocide happening right under the noses of the police and forest authorities.

**Breakneck speed**

The National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS), a protected riverine area, spans Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Touted as the

cleanest river of India, "away from all industrial pollution", by the Madhya Pradesh Tourism Department, the Chambal flows through the sanctuary, which is home to rare wildlife. The river harbours some of the most pristine sandbanks, which are the basking and egg-laying habitats for the critically endangered gharial, the critically endangered red-crowned roofed turtle, and a host of other threatened and endangered species. India's national aquatic animal, the endangered Ganges river dolphin, is also spotted here.

The area welcomes tourists and photographers from all corners of the country. Lately, however, instead



of being treated to sights of wildlife, visitors are witness to convoys of tractor trolleys, diggers and excavators destroying the sandbanks along the Chambal. Sources have reported illegal mining occurring at breakneck speed in recent months. During visits in January 2022, Indian

skimmers, threatened river terns, mugger crocodiles and the red-crowned roofed turtles, of which less than 400 females are thought to remain in the wild, were observed in the immediate vicinity (within a 100-metre radius) of multiple sandbanks being mined. According to reports, rampant sand mining within NCS is forcing gharials to migrate to Kuno and Parbati rivers, tributaries of the Chambal, in search of safer egg-laying habitats.

**Local menace**

Coupled with habitat loss, the area is facing plastic and waste pollution as a result of the mining. "The disturbance caused by excavators and the trolleys is getting worse," said a forest department employee wishing to remain anonymous. When pressed further, he said that the scale of unlawful mining had seen an increase over the past year. All this despite the presence of forest department personnel of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh at Chambal bridge, and police checkpoints on both sides of the State border.

Due to the lack of effective monitoring, either owing to resource constraints or safety concerns of invest-

gators, the true scale of illegal sand mining remains unknown. However, satellite imagery clearly shows the gradual disappearance of depositional features that form over long time periods. Conservative estimates from an on-ground investigation in January 2022 suggested that some 40,000 cubic feet of river sand was being extracted from the Chambal bridge site alone on a typical morning. If unlawful mining is brazenly progressing here, less accessible sites in the interior, away from the public gaze, are likely to be witnessing more devastation.

Conservation biologist Tarun Nair, who has reported on the ecological damage in the region, believes that ending illegal mining is a matter of administrative will. "We have repeatedly seen, most recently during COVID-19 lockdowns, that the government machinery is capable of enforcing restrictions. The reasons for not doing so here lie in the criminal-political economies of the sand mafia. That said, the 'mafia' is not an external evil but a home-grown, local menace," he says.

Attempts to eliminate illegal sand mining continue to prove futile while it has often been suggested

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128/103/2022  
 17/11/2022