



(<https://news.vice.com>)



CRIME & DRUGS (/TOPIC/CRIME-DRUGS)

How India's 'Sand Mafia' Pillages Land, Terrorizes People, and Gets Away With It



By *Sonia Paul* (/contributor/sonia-paul)

October 7, 2015 | 1:25 pm

The threats and attacks started after 26-year-old Brijmohan Yadav, a pudgy round-faced social and environmental activist, noticed suspicious activity on the riverbeds of the Betwa and Ken rivers near his home village in Bundelkhand, a drought-stricken region of central India (<https://news.vice.com/topic/india>). Mustard-yellow excavator machines were digging the beds for their gritty, tan-colored sand.

Nicknamed "red gold," the sand's individual particles are larger than those of other varieties, and its compressive strength makes it especially useful — and highly prized — for construction projects. Besides its use for making glass, sand is a key ingredient for mixing concrete, the building block of nearly all buildings and infrastructure projects in India.

A month before Yadav's discovery, the National Green Tribunal, India's foremost environmental legislative body, banned the removal of sand from riverbeds without clearance from the Environment Ministry. The measure was adopted to stop the degradation of riverbanks and associated ecosystems, and came amid public rallying against rampant illegal mining in the state.

Yadav had a personal stake in alerting the authorities. Miners were trespassing on his family's land, uprooting crops to create a road to the riverbanks and wrecking the small embankments he had built to catch the rainwater his family needed for farming. In a parched region where more than half of the population depends on agriculture, their livelihood was in peril.

Related: [India's Plan for Farmers to Solve the Drought? Yoga and Good Vibes](#) 

Two years later, the consequences of his activism are still haunting him. He says he has been intimidated and attacked by enforcers of the illicit trade, most recently in late July as he was returning home. Within a few days of filing a police complaint, a gang of men went to his house and threatened to kill him if he did not withdraw the charges. Now Yadav is in hiding.

"I am in danger... my family is in danger," he said over the phone from an undisclosed location. "The sand mafia is very strong."

This distressing situation is familiar in India, where construction demands and a lack of accountability help sustain one of the country's most infamous industries — illegal sand mining — and the notorious network of organized crime that has developed around it, known as the sand mafia.

The dangerous repercussions of drawing attention to this racket are well documented. An Indian Administrative Service officer who regularly confronted the sand mafia in Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) was found hanging in his home in March, prompting local officials to criticize the police for hastily labeling his suspicious death (<http://www.allgov.com/india/news/where-is-the-money-going/ias-officer-who-took-on-sand-mafia-found-hanging-in-bangalore-150317?news=855979>) as a

suicide. In June, a journalist in the state of Madhya Pradesh was burned alive (<http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/mining-money-and-mafia-why-journalist-sandeep-kothari-had-to-die-1434961701.html>) in alleged retaliation for reporting on illegal sand mining. The following month, men armed with swords chopped off the hand (<http://m.indiatoday.in/story/sand-mafia-chops-off-womans-hand-in-bangalore/1/448989.html>) of a woman in Bengaluru who they thought was related to tenants of her home who had fought with sand traders. When a young farmer in Rajasthan challenged unauthorized digging near his farm, which was located near a river, four men allegedly mowed him down (<http://www.oneindia.com/jaipur/rajasthan-sand-mafia-mows-down-farmer-1831180.html>) with an excavator.

"Given that it is such a low-risk activity for the organized crime group, the amount of violence it can perpetrate is tremendous," said Aunshul Rege, a professor in Temple University's department of criminal justice who has been researching India's sand mafia.

In light of these boundless hazards, anyone who dares to fight unlawful mining must be prepared for the consequences, noted Rahul Chaudhary, a lawyer with the Delhi-based Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment who represents Yadav.

"If you are trying to stop those persons who are making these kinds of monies," he remarked, "then you are inviting threats."



Unauthorized sand mining has become so prevalent that it has developed into a black market that is estimated to generate revenue of approximately \$16 million a month. (Photo by Sumaira Abdulali (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loading_illegally_dredged_sand.JPG))

Sand is being illegally mined across the country in blatant disregard of government directives and with dire consequences to the environment and the livelihoods of local residents. Fertile stretches of agricultural land are stripped bare and irreparably laid to waste. Riverbank erosion and the disruption of aquatic habitats imperil ecosystems and the industries that depend on them. They can also affect human health.

"If there is no sand, the source of purifying the water is not there," said Rajendra Singh, a well-known conservationist who is popularly known as "the water man of India" for his work with water harvesting and management. More than 60 percent of irrigated agriculture and 85 percent of drinking water in India depend on groundwater, according (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/03/06/india-groundwater-critical-diminishing>) to the World Bank — a situation amplified in Bundelkhand because of its ongoing drought, which has left local farmers increasingly desperate.

Yet India's increasing urbanization and rapid expansion of infrastructure projects has fueled a rage for the resource. The construction sector is expected to grow eight percent (<https://www.thebig5constructindia.com/knowledge-center/construction-market-in-india/>) yearly for the next decade, according to a recent trade report. As the world's second most populous country feverishly builds and modernizes, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi promising "a new Chicago every year," the demand for affordable sources of sand is unabated.

Related: [Medicine in India: 'Qualified Quacks' and a Baffling Drug Landscape](#) 

As a result, India consumes 500 million tons of the commodity annually, according to the country's Construction Industry Development Council, which guides the government on construction-related policy — and that's only the legally recorded amount. Unauthorized sand mining has become so prevalent that it has developed into a black market that is estimated to generate revenue of approximately \$16 to 17 million a month, according to Rege's research (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01924036.2015.1082486?journalCode=rcac20#.VhSA9rRViko>).

Though seemingly abundant, sand is a finite natural resource. Bringing more of it to market means sand traders can sell it to eager builders at cheaper prices. Alternative materials exist but they are not economically viable, especially when troves of sand are accessible in remote areas, said Shivam Srivastava, an architect who splits his time between Bundelkhand and Lucknow, the capital of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"That is why they are mining illegally," he said. "There are so many formalities you can't fulfill easily [to get a mining lease from the government] unless you have the proper connection." District authorities typically carry out a bidding process to determine who obtains a lease.



Sand mining near Dahanu in the western state of Maharashtra's Thane district. (Photo by Divyakant Solanki/EPA)

This demand enables a criminal network presided over by kingpins and corrupt officials to reap financial benefit, using poor farmers and scattered local middlemen to collect and transport illegally mined sand while employing toughs to handle unwanted intrusions with intimidation and violence. The fact that this web of alliances is largely informal and variable — the different parties involved change according to different regions and seasons — helps protect its operations.

"The overall success of the group is not determined by the one little part that broke down," Rege said. "This helps maintain the resiliency of the overall operation. If the folks at the lower end get caught, because of the networked structure, they don't really know who the upper people are."

The amount of money behind this industry fuels the sand mafia's seemingly endless reach.

Though much of the pillaging takes place out in the open, whether by excavating crews or mining boats that retrieve buckets of sand from beneath the water, enforcement can be impossible in areas located far from major cities, where police corruption and media bias are widespread. Evidence of the mining itself isn't enough — the courts that have the most direct legal authority

over this issue require material that implicates the special interests involved, which is exceedingly difficult to trace. Because of this, Chaudhary said, many people end up dropping their sand mining complaints.

State authorities and district magistrates, meanwhile, trust a system of checks and balances with local mining officers to ensure that lease-holders have environmental clearances and are working within the provisions outlined in their leases, such as the depth and area of digging. If wrongdoing is discovered, the property may be seized or the miners arrested. Jay Prakash, a joint director in Uttar Pradesh's mining department, explained that a fine whose amount is determined on a case-by-case basis is also imposed.

"We are taking action," he insisted. "Last year we found out about 30 crores [\$4.5 million] worth of illegal mining." But this is just a drop in the bucket compared to the illicit enterprise's estimated revenue.

Related: Cow Retirement Homes Are Booming in India — Here's Why [🔗](#)

The Union Environment Ministry drafted guidelines

([http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Centre-issues-guidelines-on-sustainable-sand-mining-proposes-crackdown-on-illegal-miners/articleshow/48893532.cms?](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Centre-issues-guidelines-on-sustainable-sand-mining-proposes-crackdown-on-illegal-miners/articleshow/48893532.cms?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=digest_section)

[utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=digest_section](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Centre-issues-guidelines-on-sustainable-sand-mining-proposes-crackdown-on-illegal-miners/articleshow/48893532.cms?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=digest_section)) last month for sustainable sand mining in India that involved a crackdown on illegal practices, including seizing equipment from non-leased mining areas as well as trucks found to be transporting illegally mined sand. But despite efforts to improve the situation, unabashed criminal activity in many areas speaks to a pervasive public belief that greed keeps most officials from firmly clamping down.

"The media persons, the political leaders, police, forest officers, district magistrates, the [state government's mining] minister, and the officers of the mines department — they are all hand in glove," said N.K. Mehrotra, a retired justice who serves as Uttar Pradesh's anti-corruption ombudsman for public servants. "They are all involved in sharing the earnings of the illegal mining."

Without the evidence necessary to implicate these parties, nailing the network of corruption and graft is a tall order, he noted. "Otherwise it will challenge the court, and the court will not permit it."



India's sand mafia uses poor farmers and scattered local middlemen to collect and distribute illegally mined sand while employing toughs to handle unwanted intrusions with intimidation and violence. (Photo by Divyakant Solanki/EPA)

Another wrinkle is the fact that, because sand is considered a minor mineral, its mining falls under state jurisdiction as opposed to the central government's. India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the country's equivalent of the FBI, issues notices to state governments to investigate complaints that come its way. But CBI officials cannot compel the state to act on these orders.

"Suppose they are involved in this matter? So they will not investigate," said P.K. Srivastava, an official with the corruption branch of Uttar Pradesh's CBI office. He added that police collusion with the government and sand traders makes the crime syndicate even trickier to penetrate. "The number of honest officers can only be counted on one hand."

Pressuring accountability on the national level has its hurdles as well. The National Green Tribunal can order the curbing of mining activities, for example. But with a chain of command that goes from national to state to district to local mining official, it becomes a matter of chasing after people to do their job. India's National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), a government-appointed legal advocacy group, filed public interest litigation with India's Supreme Court in 2013 for it to intervene, arguing that "rivers are being plundered by a powerful mafia controlling the sand

mining business," and that communities "are exposed to the peril of disastrous consequences of reckless and indiscriminate sand mining along river banks and beds." But more than two years after the court agreed to hear the case, it has yet to come up.

"The court is overburdened," said Rajesh Kumar Goel, NALSA's director.

In Bundelkhand, economic and environmental realities have enabled sand mining to become a source of opportunity as much as an aggravation and danger to those who resist it.

Shiv Pal Singh is an elected official who oversees three villages in Bundelkhand's Hamirpur district. "This has been happening for years," he railed recently, upon hearing a truck had stalled on the dirt road leading to his home village yet again and that sand had flooded the path.



Photo by Sonia Paul

The Betwa river is a five-minute walk down a dirt trail from Singh's home. Locals pointed to typical activity along the riverbed: two excavators shoveling up sand, a caravan of trucks behind them, and group of men loitering alongside the shore, waiting to load the sand onto the trucks.

Rashid Khan, a 26-year-old resident, said that many of the people who are involved in the trade are doing so because of survival more than anything else. He was speaking from experience, having taken a seasonal job supervising mining on the riverbeds of Hamirpur because of a lack of employment options. Farmers in the drought-afflicted area have been committing suicide due to the state of their holdings, he noted, leading people to try making a living from the land however else they can.

"I know it's illegal," he reflected. "But there is no problem in doing illegal work because no one is stopping us."

Follow Sonia Paul on Twitter: @sonipaul (<https://twitter.com/sonipaul>)

TOPICS: [asia & pacific \(/topic/asia-pacific\)](/topic/asia-pacific), [india \(/topic/india\)](/topic/india), [environment \(/topic/environment\)](/topic/environment), [crime & drugs \(/topic/crime-drugs\)](/topic/crime-drugs), [sand mafia \(/topic/sand-mafia\)](/topic/sand-mafia), [sand mining \(/topic/sand-mining\)](/topic/sand-mining), [organized crime \(/topic/organized-crime\)](/topic/organized-crime), [corruption \(/topic/corruption\)](/topic/corruption), [narendra modi \(/topic/narendra-modi\)](/topic/narendra-modi), [riverbeds \(/topic/riverbeds\)](/topic/riverbeds), [agriculture \(/topic/agriculture\)](/topic/agriculture), [bundelkhand \(/topic/bundelkhand\)](/topic/bundelkhand), [construction \(/topic/construction\)](/topic/construction), [urban development \(/topic/urban-development\)](/topic/urban-development), [illegal sand mining \(/topic/illegal-sand-mining\)](/topic/illegal-sand-mining)

RECOMMENDED



([video/the-war-on-drugs-join-our-skype-group-chat](/video/the-war-on-drugs-join-our-skype-group-chat))

The War On Drugs: Join Our Skype Group Chat
([video/the-war-on-drugs-join-our-skype-group-chat](/video/the-war-on-drugs-join-our-skype-group-chat))



([article/how-a-19-year-old-north-korean-escaped-and-became-a-sushi-chef-in-america](/article/how-a-19-year-old-north-korean-escaped-and-became-a-sushi-chef-in-america))

How a 19-Year-Old North Korean Escaped and Became a Sushi Chef in America
([article/how-a-19-year-old-north-korean-escaped-and-became-a-sushi-chef-in-america](/article/how-a-19-year-old-north-korean-escaped-and-became-a-sushi-chef-in-america))

