

India Loses Student Engineers on Sand Mafia Path to Deadly River

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December 17, 2014 – The Indian college kids on break would never have reached that alluring spot on the Beas River without a lane carved by trucks and tractors operated by a network of criminals known as the sand mafia. But there it was. So they filed from their tour bus parked on the rural highway above and headed down the steep-cut banks.

It was Sunday, June 8, a warm day in the Himalayan foothills near Thalout, a dot on the map in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

The patch of river looked perfect, especially after a long and aggravating bus ride. Wearing its summer demeanor, the Beas glimmered -- a broad, silt-green, slow-flowing expanse of placid water fed by snowmelt from a cloud-shrouded mountain lake about 45 miles (72 kilometers) upstream.

Raman Teja Venigalla, a 20-year-old with a mop of dark hair, waded in. He lay down in the shallows, luxuriating in the cooling eddies. His classmates fanned out around him, climbing over rocks and boulders as far out as midstream. Students gazed up at light cascading off the canyon walls, the sun drifting toward the horizon.



The Larji Project office complex rises above the river and across the highway from where the students drowned.
Photographer: Tom Lasseter/Bloomberg

Venigalla's first hint of danger came from men on the shore collecting sand who began to point and yell. Wind muffled their warnings until "I heard the word 'dam,'" he recalled.

Within minutes, the Beas turned into a monster of fulminating whitewater as crews at a towering dam of the Larji Hydroelectric Project opened its gates less than a mile upstream. Caught unawares, many of the students were swept away – the horror was captured on video by a wedding photographer on a hill above.

Venigalla, a leg catching on rocks, survived. Twenty four others drowned -- half of the 48 that had come. Their bodies, bruised and swollen, would be returned to their stunned families in wooden coffins days and even weeks later.



Baswaraj Veeresh lost his son, Sandeep, who was among the 24 students from Hyderabad's VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering and Technology who drowned. He stands in front of a portrait of Sandeep in his home on the outskirts of the city. Photographer: Tom Lasseter/Bloomberg

Blame Game

As engineering students at Hyderabad-based VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering & Technology, these were the kids with plans to build or run companies, invent apps, see and change India and the world. Entire families made sacrifices to enable their dreams. Kasarla Rishitha Reddy's father moved three generations of relatives across the packed chaos of Hyderabad just to shorten her commute. She drowned that day.

In interviews, the students' parents have blamed the engineering school and the tour operator; the tour operator and an official investigation have blamed the dam's operators; the dam's operators insist the investigators' conclusions are "wrong" and "without any basis."

Yet among the incontrovertible facts to emerge in the aftermath is that this place of tragedy should never have been accessible. The sand mafia, a ubiquitous presence up and down the Beas, ran a brazenly open and illegal operation here, across the highway from the engineering and staff offices of the Larji Hydroelectric Project.

That's according to witnesses who saw it, interviews with Larji Hydroelectric officials who say

they were helpless to stop it and court documents obtained by Bloomberg News.

How the sand mafia did so with impunity remains an unanswered question in the Beas River drownings. So does the issue, raised in the Indian press and in filings before the Himachal Pradesh High Court, of whether anyone with the Larji project had been cooperating with the sand mafia to artificially boost water releases – flushing out more sand for the mafia to steal.

Across growth-driven India, sand – cheap and plentiful in much of the world – is gold to the construction trade which uses it to mix cement. The sand mafia has been known to ravage riverbeds with heavy equipment to loot sand and sell it at steep discounts to builders, shaving hundreds if not thousands of dollars off construction costs.

Larji Hydroelectric officials and their superiors at the Himachal Pradesh State Electricity Board flatly deny collusion. In interviews, officials of both agencies said they had reported the Beas River sand mafia operation to the regional mining office and the police. Nothing changed.

The plundering ways of the sand mafia are well known. Last year, an Indian government-anointed legal advocacy group, the National Legal Services Authority, filed litigation in India's Supreme Court alleging the government's failure to control the sand mafia has had "disastrous consequences," allowing destruction of farmland, drinking water supplies and riverbeds.

It's a recurring theme in India, where since the 1960s a quest for growth coupled with lax regulation and tepid enforcement of extractive industries – uranium, coal and sand- mining among them – has raised cries for reform.

A court whose jurisdiction includes the uranium mining center of Jadugora earlier this year ordered a state-run mining company to determine whether its operations are responsible for sickening and killing village children there. Water tainted by industrial effluents including mercury has been linked by scientists for the Centre for Science and Environment to the recent deaths of dozens of children in India's central coal-mining regions. A regional medical examiner there is urging a comprehensive government study to get to the bottom of the deaths.

In its lawsuit calling for action against India's sand mafia, National Legal Services said, "the illegal trade is driven by the unholy nexus between contractors, politicians, trade union leaders, panchayat (local officials) and revenue officials and corrupt policemen."

The court filing, which doesn't name individuals, demanded a crackdown on the sand mafia by state governments and the national ministries of mining, law and the environment, noting that "it is widely known and recognized that this invidious activity has been flourishing in collusion with the police and enforcement authorities and patronage of local politicians."

People with alleged ties to the sand mafia have also been charged with violent crimes in a number of jurisdictions. That includes the murder of an activist who dared to stand up against them, according to police and court documents obtained by Bloomberg News.

Well-Deserved Break

Exams at Vignana Jyothi Institute, on the dusty edge of Hyderabad, ended on June 1. Two days later the engineering students headed up north for



The Beas River in more placid times. This is just downstream of the site of the drownings, where the sand mafia ran an unauthorized sand-mining operation in sight of the office complex of the Himachal Pradesh State Electricity Board's Larji hydroelectric project, sitting above the river on the left.

Photographer: Tom Lasseter/Bloomberg

a break. The city had been baking in 100-plus degree Fahrenheit heat (37.8 degrees Celsius) for a week. The kids wanted a rest.

Baswaraj Veeresh took his son, 20-year-old Baswaraj Sandeep, down to the train station that Tuesday evening. They had to borrow a neighbor's car – Veeresh drives a motorbike and there wasn't room for luggage.

To keep Sandeep, as he called himself, in college for his first two years of study, Veeresh had already spent 205,000 rupees (\$3,230). It was half of his savings and it was clear the account would be empty by the time his son graduated. Still, he'd handed over 8,500 rupees for a seat on the trip.

"Be careful," Veeresh said to Sandeep, whose ears stuck out a bit, just like his father's. The students clambered on to the hard blue sleeper seats of the Nizamuddin Express. As the train began to roll north, a night breeze blowing through open metal slats in the windows, they played cards, sent text messages and gossiped, letting the stress of home fade.

It takes more than 26 hours to rumble across

some 920 miles to the city of Agra, where the Taj Mahal stands. From Agra, they boarded two tour buses to New Delhi and then continued north to Himachal Pradesh -- a favorite summering spot for British colonialists.

As the plains rose into mountains, and the banana trees gave way to towering pines, the buses climbed from 700 feet (213 meters) above sea level to about 7,000 feet.

They finally reached the state capital of Shimla. In a snapshot taken the evening they arrived, a group of students stand beneath a set of Victorian-style streetlights, a neon bar sign casting a glow on the restaurant on their left. Everyone is smiling. Behind them, lights twinkle on a hillside.

Small-Timer Exceptions

In a nook of the rounded, tree-clad foothills rising above the Beas, Gauru Ram sat in the dimness of a tea stall, a shanty whose ceiling was propped up by four worn log beams.

Outside, a footbridge stretched across the Beas's lulling waters. Two men on the river below filled sacks with sand, strapping them to the backs of four donkeys. Ram, taking a drag on a cheap cigarette, said he was their boss. There are no sand-mining permits awarded here, according to regional mining officials interviewed by Bloomberg News, but Ram said his job is necessary.

In Himachal Pradesh, the roads often squeeze to a single lane, slowing traffic to a crawl as one vehicle waits for another to pass on steep, twisting mountain passes. Everything must go up the mountain -- barefoot holy men in saffron robes, six-wheeled dump trucks sagging from the weight of gravel, porters carrying crates of apples lashed to their shoulders, and one tourist bus after the next.

It takes almost an hour to groan the 22 miles from the nearest town, Mandi, to this spot, outside of Thalout, where tea stands are among the few diversions off the highway. To put up a new building that clings to a cliff side -- as most do here, whether a three-story car dealership stacked like a wedding cake or a modest home -- means hiring trucks to haul sand to mix into concrete.

Avoiding the cost of buying sand from a licensed business shaves 30,000 rupees from the cost of a house, said Amar Singh, who runs a grocery stand in the area. That's significant money in India, where gross national income per capita is about \$1,500 a year.

Some officials make a distinction between unauthorized small-bore sand mining done by workers using shovels and mules and the industrial-level depredations often associated with the sand mafia.

Rajender Singh, director of industries among the state's most senior officials in charge of mining, said it's unreasonable to expect small timers to meet national requirements for environmental approvals.

Without the informal sand-mining trade, "construction activities would have come to a stop," said Singh, a man in a snug blue wool vest sitting behind the desk of his office in Shimla. "A little bit here and there -- I don't mind saying that."

In the tea stand, when talk turned to sand mining efforts that use trucks and industrial tractors -- like the large sand-mafia operations -- Ram, 42, broke off the interview without another word.

Frustrating Trip

The bus carrying the students left Shimla in the morning. The trip was troubled from the start.

The bus driver demanded advance payment from one of their professors, who didn't have the cash with him. A punctured tire stranded them for at least an hour.

Worried about making it to the town of Manali in time for a river-rafting trip, some of the students asked whether it was going to happen. "It depends on if you people want to have lunch," was the driver's reply.

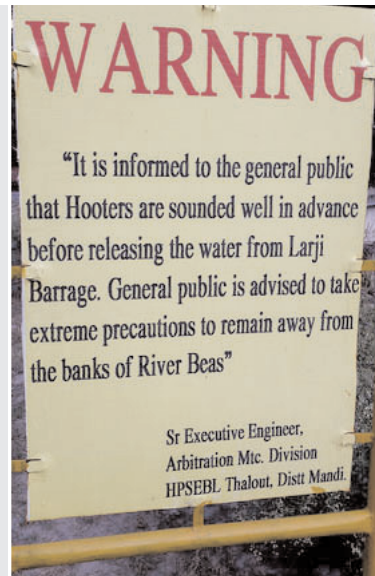
They stopped at about 4 p.m. to finally eat something. The compartment holding the food was stuck. It took about half an hour with a crowbar to get it open. Baswaraj Veeresh called his son, Sandeep, at about 5:15. They'd just finished lunch, Sandeep said. "I made a mistake by coming," he told his father.

Sometime before 6:30 p.m., the bus pulled over again. Someone had to use the bathroom. Someone wanted to take photographs. The driver steered into a stretch of open space on the roadside, next to a red, corrugated tin hut with bags of snack chips. White lettering above the doorway identified it as the Thakur Tea Stall.

The students filed out one-by-one. There were no warning signs, just a path down to the ankle-deep Beas reached by a short walk across the sand.

They removed their shoes and rolled up their jeans, hopping across rocks, taking in the scenery, craning their heads to catch glimpses of the mountain peaks.

They pulled out cameras. One shot captured Ashish Mantha, 19. He was a popular kid recovering from family heartbreak – his father died of a heart attack last year. There he was, crouched in front of 11 friends, mostly young women, his hands thrown up in greeting, a goofy grin on his face. The river flowed behind them.



A sign warning passersby to stay away from the Beas River site of the June 8 drowning of 24 Indian college students near Thalout, India.
Photographer: Tom Lasserter/Bloomberg

The sun ambled toward the horizon, soft light sliding down the canyon walls. In the background, a truck was rumbling along the banks.

It was during those moments of calm that Raman Venigalla waded into the water.

History of Violence

When the sand mafia doesn't get the cooperation of officials, things can turn ugly. In 2013, after a bureaucrat in the south of Himachal Pradesh began leading raids against illegal sand mining, tractor drivers attempted to ram his jeep that June, and in July and then again in August.

During the last confrontation, said Yunus Khan, a tractor laden with sand came roaring from behind at about 4:45 a.m. on a bridge. Police confirmed that the driver was arrested for obstructing a public servant from enforcing the law.

"It's not a safe job," Khan said in a series of telephone interviews. "When we tried to stop people, we were attacked... We are bound by law and we are doing our duty, and during the course of action, if some people are hurt by the crackdown of district authorities, they can do

anything. Those people, they can do anything.” Khan was transferred to the state capital of Shimla for a more senior position.

The brutality has ended up on the doorsteps of the nation’s capital. Paleram Chauhan, a 52-year-old farmer, was among a group of activists in an eastern suburb of New Delhi that had petitioned the local government, filed a lawsuit and called the cops to try to shut down a sand-mafia operation that was damaging their crops near the Yamuna River.

In July 2013 in broad daylight, three men pulled up on a motorbike in the alley behind Chauhan’s house. At least two of them crept into his bedroom, using his unlocked, orange-painted front door to gain entrance. They pulled guns and riddled his body with bullets.

Four men face murder charges, according to police reports. During the brief spike of coverage in the Indian press that followed, officials visited the family home to offer condolences – and to advise the family to not push too hard for an investigation into the sand mafia or the murder, said Chauhan’s brother, Pratap Singh.

“This was written, this was destiny,” Singh recounted them saying. “If you take it forward maybe there will be more tragedy.”

Water Without Warning

The first blast of water – accompanied by the roar of rapids – hit the students just after 6:35 p.m.

Venigalla tried to get away. He saw four classmates stranded on a boulder, clutching one another as the river rushed past. There was nowhere to go. The small rocks they’d skipped across to reach the boulder were already under water.

“I was looking into their eyes and they were looking into mine,” Venigalla recalled later. The moment didn’t last -- a wave knocked him off his feet and the river dragged him down.

He was a moment from being swept away when his left leg jammed between two rocks, like a piece of driftwood. Luck saved him and then someone pulled him out.

Chetan Chavan, 20, remembered chatting with one of the two professors who accompanied the trip. They had come down the path together and were standing on a rock close to the bank when the water suddenly surrounded them. “You can swim?” the teacher asked him.

They both could -- and thanks to their proximity to the bank, they made it out alive.

Chavan looked over at one point to see his friend, Kalluri Sree Harsha, also 19. He was in a blue-check shirt and jeans, standing in the rising water.

“He was very calm, he just closed his eyes. He knew what the outcome would be. He let the water take him,” said Chavan. Ashish Mantha had also made it up on a rock, not long after he’d posed for that group snapshot. He, too, was washed away.

Adithya Kashyap, the second professor on the trip, was up at the Thakur Tea Stall, asking the bus driver where the tour operator had gone. A man ran over, yelling that the river was rising.

Kashyap, a heavysset 30-year-old fond of untucked shirts, hustled part way to the river, and then saw another man throw a rope toward struggling students. He turned back in frantic confusion, wishing he could find a rope as well. There was none.

“What was happening? What to do?” he

thought.

He caught a glimpse of a cluster of his students trying to keep their footing on a rock: “They tried to hold each other but they couldn’t save themselves,” said. His gaze fell on Sandeep Veeresh, standing on a rock, looking terrified. And then Sandeep was gone.

Minutes to Kill

The deluge appears to have taken only five to ten minutes to kill the students.

That was among the conclusions of an investigation by the Divisional Commissioner’s Office in Mandi, the chief representative of state government where the drownings occurred. It mentions illegal sand mining but does not draw a connection between that activity and the drowning deaths. The 47-page report said that Larji project operators had erred by letting water behind the dam rise too high, thus necessitating the huge release that killed the students.

A magistrate court in Mandi, the nearest town to the drownings, is also holding hearings on the flood. “The main aspect was the negligent act of the dam operators,” said K.C. Rana, the district police official who oversaw an investigation for the court. In an interview, Rana said he had found no evidence of collusion between the sand mafia and Larji project workers.

The State Electricity Board, which ultimately oversees the dam, objected to the operator-error findings. A Larji power project official insisted in an interview that the discharge was unavoidable because water levels had gotten so high that they flooded a town rimming the reservoir and could have undermined the dam itself.

Yet documents submitted by the Electricity

Board’s own officials to the Himachal Pradesh High Court labeled accounts of flooding in Aut “imaginary” and said that “the alleged rise in water level” took place “much after the time of the accident.

The board’s filings also blamed the swollen reservoir on water releases from another hydroelectric plant, known as Parbati III, on a tributary of the Beas. Yet logs from the other hydroelectric plant, filed in evidence, show that its water discharges were minimal during that period and couldn’t have contributed to the high levels of the Larji reservoir, C.B. Singh, Parbati’s general manager at the time, said in an interview.

Documents from the Electricity Board concluded that the path used by the students to reach the river was built by the sand mafia. There was no siren blast to accompany the water release -- or if there was, it wasn’t audible downstream, according to interviews at the site and witness accounts in the Divisional Commissioner report.

The report also said locals on a cliff high above the river and Manoj Kumar, a caretaker for a nearby substation, attempted to warn the students of danger. Kumar, who speaks with a heavy accent, said in an interview that he was outside his house above the river and that the kids didn’t appear to understand him.

Students interviewed by Bloomberg News said that no one told them to stay out of the river or urged them to flee until the waters were already upon them.

Dilip Sharma, a lawyer appointed by the High Court, declined to comment saying he didn’t want to add to “publicity” surrounding the deaths.

Parents of the students retained a lawyer, blaming the VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute, the



Kasarla Rishitha Reddy was among the victims. Her parents, her mother, K. Shobha, and father, K. Krishna, stand to either side of her portrait in their home in Hyderabad.

Photographer: Tom Lasseeter/Bloomberg

engineering school, for a field- trip gone terribly awry with its malfunctioning bus and hiring a tour guide who knew nothing of the Beas River area. The college administration declined an interview request.

Murali Krishna, who signed documents as proprietor of the Hyderabad tour agency, said there were “minor issues” with the bus and a spat over the payment but the company -- now, according to Krishna, out of business -- wasn’t responsible for the deaths, he said. “It’s the dam people, because they released the water and there were no signboards and there was no siren,” said Krishna, who also served as a tour leader.

The families received about \$8,000 in High Court-ordered compensation per student, half paid by the engineering school and half by the Electricity Board, but plan to push for a higher sum, said their lawyer Suneet Goel.

K. Krishna Reddy, the father who relocated his family to make his daughter’s studies easier, said in an interview that one thing is clear: “If those roads didn’t exist, our children wouldn’t have reached the river and wouldn’t have died. The sand mafia is one of the culprits.”

Signs and Suspicions

Across the highway from the utilitarian Larji Hydroelectric offices, a warning sign and barbed-wire fences now mark the spot of the Beas River drownings. The same signs also dot the road along the river in various places.

P.C. Negi, managing director of the State Electricity Board, said signs that once existed where the drowning occurred had previously been torn down by vandals.

On the ground, puzzlement and suspicion abounds. There are no permits to legally mine sand in the area, said Kulbhushan Sharma, the head government mining officer for Mandi district where the Larji project is located and who is in a position to know.

The presence of the sand mafia operating so openly across from the offices is difficult to explain. “Being a part of the government they should not allow such activities on their land,” said Singh.

From his seat in the tea stand, Jeevan Ram Thakur, a 28- year-old official who oversees a number of villages in the hills surrounding the Thalout area, has seen and heard much.

The sand mafia in the area is alive and well, he said. While there is no preannounced daily schedule of when the water from the Larji dam will be released, the sand mafia trucks always “seem to know when the water will come,” especially big releases, according to Thakur.

Reflecting on the drownings, he has an opinion. “The electricity board, the administration and the sand mafia – in that area, all of them are responsible,” he said.

A Father’s Grief

The dead had big plans.

Kalluri Sree Harsha, tall and handsome with high cheek bones, wanted to get his master's degree in the U.S. and return to India to start a company.

Ashish Mantha planned to start an aerospace club at school and, after graduation, join his older brother to study in the U.S. – it was their late father's wish that they both get Ph.Ds.

Kasarla Rishitha Reddy had been in a flash mob dance video filmed at a local shopping mall and loved to sing. Her mother, K. Shobha, recalled that she wanted Rishitha to get married after college: "She said no, after graduation, MS" – a master's of science degree.

From the living room of his courtyard house in Hyderabad, Baswaraj Veeresh, Sandeep's dad, remembers the 1 a.m. mobile phone call from the police days after his son had disappeared. The

body had been found. Police texted him photos. There were Sandeep's feet – one still in a white and black tennis shoe, the other in a brown sock.

Veeresh, a large photo of Sandeep looming high on the wall above him, offered a chronology of his son's life, pausing sometimes to weep quietly.

Some parents held out desperate hope that their children might simply be lost in the hills of Himachal Pradesh. Veeresh, 51, had no such illusions. He had called his son's mobile phone "20 or 30 times."

And he knew something else. Sandeep, he said, couldn't swim.

– Editors: Jason Rogers, Ken Wells, Will Wade