

## **WHY ILLEGAL SAND MINING PROLONGS...Renganathapuram Experience**

### **Foreword:**

There are violators of traffic rules go scot-free with the tacit support of corrupt police officers but, by and large, traffic rules have been strictly implemented with close vigilance of the cops in the state or otherwise, the entire nation will become accident prone zone. There are lawbreakers on the prowl with their accomplices from government departments, however, law and order is maintained to a safe extent or otherwise, savagery will be unbound on the civilians. When the fight is between two individuals, judiciary may deliver right judgment. But, when it is between the ruling class and the people, judiciary always stands by the perpetrators. Anyway, judiciary serves still pro-people - however, it delays in passing judgments - or otherwise, the criminals will be let loose on the masses.

Likewise, there are illegal sand miners overexploiting the sand but, the environment law remains impotent. But, the clique of government officials and politicians – even ministers – help the miners elude and escape from all possible clutches of legal system and, prosper day by day in the society. Sporadic movements of the people could not check the mining but result in the loss of human lives; even government's white paper is stained with the blood of sincere government officials and social workers, who ventured to check the illegal sand mining. Government spokespersons, so-called intellectuals, media and of course, the reactionaries call this network of criminals, legislators and administrators DEMOCRACY!

### **Background:**

The rivers of Tamil Nadu were full of sands twenty- thirty years ago. The sand was mined in order to cater to the construction need of the local villages and government offices. The elders from the river running villages and those who have had frequented visiting rivers can substantiate the fact that water was flowing all through the years in all the rivers and they were abundant with sparkling sand in dry seasons.

Since the rivers had sand all over their pathways, ground water table all along their winding routes was kept intact and the farmers had enough water for irrigation. Since water was flowing in the rivers throughout the years, the surface water bodies also had water in all seasons except summer. So, people used the common water resources for bathing and washing, leaving the ground water resource intact. Due to the abundant water availability, agricultural practices were widespread, using organic manures and pesticides.

The unplanned housing schemes and unrestrained mining of sand paved way for the destruction of rivers. Exploiting the natural resources for the growing needs and wants of the society may be inevitable but destroying the natural resources is something atrocious and fatal to the very life of humans and other organisms on the globe. As the sand being transformed in to a commodity, sand mafias have grown in the state and with their

money, muscle and political power, they ravage the sand resources beyond restoration and let the rivers die gradually. Dearth of effective implementation of environmental laws and death of morality among the people sped up the process of the entry of rowdy politicians and big shots in mining business.

A farmer has to toil all day long, throughout the prime agricultural period to get their crops grown and saved from the attack of pests - just to get the fruits of his labour. Apart from their labour, they have to invest a huge sum of money for procuring resource materials. On the contrary, these miners spend a little money, a little labour, engage modern machineries and ear huge profit.

In those days, mostly bullock carts were engaged in loading sand and men were engaged in mining. Due to this, the resources were not exploited not at an alarming state. Today, the illegal sand miners engage modern machineries in mining sand, which itself is against the principles of mining, and destroy the resources at an alarming speed.

Of course, there are environmental laws to check the adverse impact of sand mining and the like on the environment and the social life in India. The gory deaths of people – the government officials and environmental activists, who opposed illegal sand mining - in the hands of the thugs engaged by the miners are the living examples to illustrate how effective and pro people is the legal system.

### **Illegal sand mining in Kattalai-Renganathapuram:**

Kattalai of Karur district in Tamil Nadu – a beautiful hamlet located on the bank of Cauvery – is the place where AREDS' head office is located. However, its beauty is withering away fast due to the adverse impact of illegal mining. AREDS has been fighting against illegal mining since 1981, in order to preserve the livelihood resources of the villagers.

### **Nefarious Network:**

Illegal mining is ramified in all places in Tamil Nadu - Wherever Rivers are running - and it generates employment opportunities to many across the state. Illegal sand mining is operated through a powerful network of the politicians, ministers, government officials, miners, well off customers, rowdies and ignorant rural people fallen victim to illegal mining process. The people of each aforesaid category remain links in a long chain of this notorious process. It is agonising to see how the rural people fall prey to the baits of the manipulators.

For supervising the mining operation, persons are employed directly by the miners, on high salary. Drivers are needed to operate trucks that carry away sand. For this, they capture the youth from the locality where the mining operation is going on, train them, and engage them as their drivers. The salary that a driver receives per month is equal to the salary of a person in IT profession in metropolitan cities. Another section of youth are

trained on operating poclain (earthmovers) and engaged in hoarding sand on the riverbed, certainly on much higher wages.

The road laid to Renganathapuram village by the government is not meant for the movements of heavy trucks. Although, the heavy trucks that are used to carry away sand, ply on the very same road and cause severe damage to the road. Therefore, road repair is necessary for the easy movement of the trucks. The miners engage the local people on high wages for taking care of the road. The road supervisors will put soil and the leaves of canes in to the pits and, make the road temporarily even.

The continuous plying of trucks has transformed the tar road in to a mud road and even a two-wheeler's movement will let the dust fly and cause inconveniences to the pedestrians and truck drivers. A tanker lorry is engaged to water the road in order to settle down the dust. It waters the road at regular intervals and facilitates the movement of trucks.

Since mining operation takes place mostly in daytime, persons for counting the volume of sand loaded on each lorry are badly needed. The local people are again engaged in this work on high wages as usual.

People can have a square meal for Rs.20 in town and cities. Renganathapuram is a tiny village, where a mess serves mid-day meal for Rs.20 with poor recipe. The owner of the mess capitalizes the need of the truck drivers and earns surplus profit. It is quite natural, as there is an opening for generating income, the entire family of the mess owner will support the sand mining operation.

Renganathapuram is remotely located on the bank of Cauvery, two kilometers away from Karur – Trichy main road. Bus transport to this village is infrequent and the people have to walk all the way from the village to the main road for catching buses to their destination. The truck drivers freely give a lift to the people as far as the main road and the village, back and forth. Naturally, the people who make use of the trucks for transportation will not oppose the plying of trucks that carry away the precious mineral.

Amazingly, nearly 150 people are getting employment opportunity everyday – directly or indirectly - on high wages in this tiny village because of this mining unit. For the villagers, it is the matter of livelihood for the present, no matter if it destroys the livelihood resources in the long run.

### **Impact of sand mining:**

- ⊕ The elders of this village narrate how fertile and rich in water resource once their village was. The riverbed was five-foot deep from the bank 20 years ago. Now, it is twenty-foot deep and this indicates the dwindling of minor mineral at an alarming rate. This immediately effected in the depletion of ground water – people say the water is become scarce and tasteless. Paucity of water laid its fatal hand first on agriculture and now, there is a sharp decline in the agricultural practices.

- ⊕ When a truck is loaded with sand, it is loaded along with litres of soft water. This water drips down all along the runway and makes it slushy. When there is a hue and cry for banning bottling plants all over the globe – for their unlimited exploitation of ground water - the illegal mining operation wastes water in devil-may-care manner.
- ⊕ As the agriculture could not provide adequate employment opportunities to the local landless labourers, the situation forces the people to seek the support of illegal miners for getting their livelihood assured.
- ⊕ Due to the over exploitation of river sand, the watercourse has become lower than the level of irrigation canals and hence, the irrigation canals get water only when the river is flooded. As a result, the local tanks that depend upon the river for water remain dried all through the years, except the years that have heavy downpour. Thus, over exploitation of river sand results in the destruction of agricultural practices, across the districts and state.
- ⊕ As the agricultural practices are dwindling day by day, the farmers either sell their lands to the miners or allow the miners to dredge the precious sand lying beneath their lands.



- ⊕ The miners deface the lands lying on the banks of Cauvery, dredge the sand up to 20 to 30 foot deep and make artificial pools. By dredging so, they are directly exposing the water aquifers to the scorching sunlight. This will dry up the fountains and result in the depletion of ground water resources.

### **History of AREDS' movements against illegal mining of sand:**

AREDS, with remote sensing to preserve the ecology-environment of Cauvery - Amaravathi river basins, organized the people in thousands and built up different forms of mighty movement. People, who had realized that their very livelihood was at stake due to mining, took to the streets at the call of AREDS on several occasions. The following are the highlight of the movements:

- On 25.11.1991, 27.4.1992, 5.4.1996 and 15.11.1996 AREDS went on road blockade. Numbers of petitions were sent to the Karur district collector, Chief Minister and Governor of Tamil Nadu on behalf of people's movements and women's organisations initiated by AREDS.



- AREDS also filed a case – OS.56/90 – against illegal sand mining with ADM Court at Kulithalai. But there was no response to it from the buffalo-skinned government. So, a writ petition – 5762/90 - was filed with High Court, Chennai on behalf of Mr. P.R.Kuppasamy, the president of Cauvery River Protection Committee and Mr. Karikalan, the president of Kattalai Youth Association. As a result, mining in Cauvery was banned by the High Court the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1999.



- The contractor, being infuriated, let his rowdies loose on SWATE and they set the shed on arson on the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1999. Women's organisations, woman activists, SHG members held a protest demonstration against the atrocity and protested the tacit support of the government to the perpetrators. In response to the protest, the then so-called democratic government arrested the protestors.



- After continuous struggles, the case filed against mining ended with the verdict of Justices Jagadeesan and Padmanapan of Chennai High Court on 30.4.2001 that spelt cancellation of the contract license and ordered compensation for the ecological damages caused and, CBI enquiry in to the matter.

- A high level citizen committee was formed for fact finding with the following citizens as the members:

1. V.Karuppan, IAS (retd)
2. Dr.N.Markandan, Former Vice Chancellor, Gandhigram Rural University, Tamil Nadu
3. K.Manoharan (S.V.Rajadurai), Writer and Human Rights Activist
4. P.V.Bhaktvatsalam, Senior Advocate and Human Rights Activist
5. Dr. M.Arunachalam, Environmental Scientist, Manonmaiyan Sundaranar University
6. Dr. V.Radhakrishnan, Department of Geology, V.O.C.College, Tuticorin
7. Valentina, State Joint Secretary, All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)
8. Jesuratnam, Advocate and Convener, Coastal Action Network, Tamil Nadu
9. T.Fatimson, Convener, Campaign for Right to Livelihood and Food Security, Tamil Nadu

- But, the Karur district collector's 'democratic' administration, neglecting the court verdict and the recommendations of High Level Citizens' Committee, was allowing illegal mining. So, AREDS had to continue its struggle against illegal mining in the following years.

- On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2003, the then government took over the right of quarrying sand in order to curtail the over exploitation of sand by the private contractors but, PWD too did not comply with the rules and regulations of Mines and Minerals Act. Since there was a love lost between the private contractors and the government, the present government intended to endow the quarrying right to private hands but fortunately, its endeavour was sabotaged by the united protest from the environmentalists, NGOs and opposition parties.

### **Outcome of the struggle against sand mining:**

- As the government – the ultimate stakeholder – does not implement the environmental laws in the state, as the judiciary fails to pass verdict promptly on the issues like environmental degradation and ecological damage, as the administration is hand in glove with the perpetrators, as the people became aware of the killings of sincere government officials and social workers who protested illegal mining, people become frustrated and give up struggle.
- In the absence of people's movements, illegal mining is flourishing. Indignant people, being scared of the muscle and money power of the miners, become depressed.

- The local people, being unaware or partially aware of the dangers of mining, join themselves as one of the links in the chain of mining process as a way of exploring their livelihood. Most of the families in the village are connected with this illegal mining some or other way.
- Since the local population in Renganathapuram is a homogeneous mixture of Dalit communities, even the elders of the village – who are very well aware of the adverse impact of sand mining – are unwilling to prohibit the youth from engaging themselves in mining related works in their village. And, protesting sometimes means breaking up of family relationship - cropping up of feuds.
- Thus, illegal mining not only destroys the environment and livelihood resources but also shatters the human emotions and values.
- Further, the delay in passing pro-people and pro-environmental judgment against sand mining and the nexus between the government departments and the miners have watered down the fighting spirit of the local people. The false cases filed against the activists by the miners – which are still prolonging – are the real ordeal to the activists.
- Well-meaning people remain mere silent spectators, witnessing the environmental degradation with agony.

However, AREDS is still simmering with the fighting spirit and upholding justice against illegal activities. It held a press-meet on the 17th of May 2008 at Karur in protest against the notification of the Tamil Nadu government permitting private contractors to mine sand in rivers and the cancellation of government quarries that came in to existence to curb illegal mining.

### **Clandestine Mining:**

Mining operation is going on round the clock in Renganathapuram. Besides open burglary in the broad daylight with trucks, sand is burgled in the dark night hours with bullock-carts. A minimum of 50 carts-loads of sand are being mined daily from Renganathapuram, violating the rules of Forest Department. The Forest Department people allow them to mine against paying of certain amount for each cart. The mining process and the volume of sand being mined during the night hours are not closely watched.

### **Mining scenario at state level:**

It seems that the illegal miners are omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, as the government the supposed-to-be almighty is on their side. The reports on illegal mining across the state and its adverse environmental impact deserve a place in newspapers daily - almost.



கடல் அமராவதி புதிய பாலத்திலிருந்து தொடர் தூரத்திலேயே தினசரி தூற்றுக்கும் மேற்பட்ட மாட்டு வண்டிகளில் மணல் அள்ளப்படுவதை அலுவலர்கள் கண்டுக்கொள்வதில்லை. அருகிலேயே தீரேற்று கிணறு உள்ளது குறிப்பிடத்தக்கது.



வேலூர் அடுத்த கீரிஞ்சிதாம்பலாற்று அருகே மணல் குவாரியில் இருந்து வெளியூரில்களுக்கு அதிகளவில் மணல் எடுத்து செல்லப்படுகிறது. இதற்கு எதிர்ப்பு தெரிவித்து அப்பகுதி மக்கள் 150 வரிகளை சிறு பிடித்தனர்.



கிருஷ்ணகிரியை அடுத்த மாநேப்பட்டடி தென்பெள்ளை ஆற்றில் குடிநீர் கிணறு அருகே களைத்தளமாக மாட்டு வண்டிகளில் மணல் எடுக்கப்படுவதால், ஊற்று நீர் வறறி குடிநீர் தட்டுப்பாடு ஏற்பட்டுள்ளது.

Avur is a village, located on the bank of Cauvery, in Musiri taluk of Trichy district. The miners broke open the bank on the side of Amur and leveled the floor to ease the movement of the trucks that carry away sand. One Mr. Subbarayan filed a public interest litigation against this illegal act of the miners on the plea that the breach of the bank will cause flood to the village during rainy season. The Madurai Bench of Chennai High Court ordered the PWD to fortify the bank immediately.



கருச் அமராவதி ஆற்றில் நீர்வாத்து குறைந்ததை தொடர்ந்து, தற்போது மாட்டுவண்டிகளில் மணல் எடுப்பு பணி துவங்கி உள்ளது. அமராவதி புதிய பாலத்தின் அருகில் நேற்று மணல் எடுத்து செல்லும் மாட்டு வண்டிகள்.



மிர்புலையில் 'முத்துக்குளித்தல்' காலத்தில் ஆற்றுக்குள் மூழ்கி மாட்டு வண்டிகளில் மணல் எடுக்கிறார்கள். பட்டப்பலியேய சர்வ சாதாரணமாக இரட்டை மாட்டு வண்டிகளில் இந்த மணல் திருட்டு மட்ட ஆற்றுப்பகுதியில் பொதுமக்கள் குளிக்கும் இடத்தில் நாளாழறும் மாட்டுவண்டிகளால் மணல் அள்ளப்படுகிறது. இதனால் அப்பகுதியில் புதைகுளிகள் ஏற்பட்டு உயிர்ப்பறிக்கும் அபாய நிலை உள்ளது.

இனத்தத்தி இருச்சி 22-6-2008

முசிறி அருகே மணல் லாரிகள் செல்வதற்காக  
**உடைக்கப்பட்ட காவிரி ஆற்றின் கரையை**  
**உடனடியாக சீரமைக்க வேண்டும்**  
**பொதுப்பணித்துறையினருக்கு**  
**மதுரை ஐகோர்ட்டு உத்தரவு**

தர்மராஜ், வேலூர்மேயுலால் ஆலியோர் ஆட்சியை எதிர்த்துப் போராடும் முறையாக விவசாய மணல்க்கு வந்தது. அப்போது பொதுப்பணித்துறையினர் அப்பகுதியில் பதில் மணல் தளங்களை

**Lawbreakers:**

According to the laws of mining of minor minerals, sand must be lifted only up to three-foot deep and a truck should be loaded with three units of sand per trip and, each truck

should get loaded against trip sheet. This is for regulating the mining process and keeping the ecological balance.

On the contrary, each truck is heavily loaded beyond the limit and only one third of the total number of trucks engaged in mining have trip sheets. One-third of the trucks only have the government permission to lift sand. Police officers on highway patrol – who are supposed to catch the thieves and the criminals - being aware of this fact, beggarly collect Rs.50 per truck, openly in the broad daylight.

### **Press-Meet against Tamil Nadu government's notification for privatizing the sand quarrying:**

Tamil Nadu government announced a notification that permits private contractors to mine sand in rivers and the cancellation of government quarries that came in to existence to curb illegal mining in May 2008. Protesting against this, AREDS held a press-meet in May 2008, raising the following demands:

- A body of geologists and scientists must be formed and a scientific environmental impact study must be done. If there are no negative impacts on water resources for drinking and irrigation, the state government should publish a declaration on it and then only it should allow sand mining
- The available sand to be lifted in a particular quarry area Criteria on the volume of sand to be loaded per lorry and number of lorries must be made and government should strictly stick on to them
- A monitoring committee must be formed to oversee the volume of sand being mined and loaded. Local farmers, agricultural labourers and members from the body of geologists and scientists must be the members of this monitoring committee. Women must be given 50% representation in this committee.

The government led by AIADMK took over quarrying of sand in 2003, which was in the hands of private contractors before then, in a bid to curtail the over exploitation of miner minerals - as it had pronounced. The government that came to power after - led by DMK - continued the same policy. Unfortunately, on the 19th of May 2008, it announced that mining of sand will be operated via private contractors in the state. Well-meaning people, environmentalists, NGOs and of course, the opposition parties protested the move of the government.

AREDS, with all its experience of struggle against illegal sand mining and police atrocity, immediately held press-meet at Karur on the government's move to privatize sand quarrying. The following is the theme presented by AREDS to the press:

### **Failure of the Government System:**

The genuine voices of the people, whose livelihood resources are destroyed due to illegal sand mining, were blown in to air by the callous attitude of the government. Hundreds of

trucks are carrying away the precious sand on the road to Renganathapuram without any obstacles, till date.

Indian government – of course, all the governments headed by various political parties at different periods – claims that India is one of the largest democratic countries in the world, which has well sophisticated administrative structures and well defined laws to rule the people. Since it says so, it must be scruple enough to take action against the offenders, who over exploit the natural resources. However, the news of environmental pollution, ecological damages, illegal sand mining, contamination of water, deforestation caused by the industries and companies occupy some place compulsorily on the pages of newspapers and on TV – of course in the big Democratic India.

The environmental laws have been strictly implemented in the developed countries and so law of polluters-pay is strictly practiced there. But, here it is overlooked. Noyyal River is irreversibly polluted by the dyeing units of Thirupur, but no effective steps have been taken by the government against the polluters, except closing down some small units.

When the people of Kerala, the nearby state, drove away the notorious bottling plant of coca-cola, Tamil Nadu government has allocated some place for Coca-Cola and Pepsi along the pathway of Thamiraparani and Vaigai. It, being unmindful of the protests from the indigenous farmers and peasants, bountifully allows the MNCs to procure thousands of aurable lands for special economic zone.

Multinational companies, considering India as a dumping ground, dispose their worn-out ships laden with toxic contents in the Indian Territory. The Indian government, only after goaded by the environmentalists and NGOs, reluctantly spells no to such acts. Electronic wastes are also dumped in the name of beneficial endowment from developed countries.

Tamil Nadu state government too, instead of generating employment opportunities to the people at grassroots level and people living below poverty line, supplying free TV – which again is an attempt to increase the volume of electronic wastes in the state.

Illegal sand mining is rampant all over the state. Supporting the illegal activities against public interest is the basic trait of all political parties and that is why, any government headed by any political party is behind illegal sand mining. The act of government that allows illegal mining at the cost of natural environment and livelihood resources of the nation is definitely ANTI-PEOPLE.

### **What is to be done:**

- The degeneration of Indian environment is detrimental to the global environment also and so, it warrants serious attention from the environmentalists across the globe. Since environment remains the livelihood resource for the people at grassroots level and downtrodden masses, the national agencies, with the assistance of the international agencies, must undertake a study on the impact of mining on the social life of Indian people.

- Therefore, a big level, socio-scientific research on the adverse effect of illegal mining in Renganathapuram must be made and the inferences must be brought to the knowledge of the world. Certainly, scientists and environmentalist from UN bodies must be a part of this research team.
- A state level public hearing must be convened at Kattalai village, with the entire communities affected by the illegal mining and the miners. This will be the right way to expose the other side of the culprits and the government officials – which is certainly ugly.
- The persons responsible for the irreversible damage caused to the environment must be made to pay for retrieving the loss of natural resources.
- A high level lobbying committee must be formed with the participation of the affected people and certainly, AREDS that tied the bell to the cat against illegal mining in Karur district.
- It is evident that the sand mafias and their cliques form a league to swindle the miner minerals all over the nation. The rulers connive over this, as they get the lion's share of benefit from illegal sand mining and the government plays spoilsport. Therefore, purging of the Indian legislation and the administration is needed.