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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Arrest the Grief — Chambal Gharial Sanctuary and the Sand Mining Mafia

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Arrest the Grief — Chambal Gharial Sanctuary and the Sand Mining Mafia

The Hindu

7 April 2026

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CONTEXT

The Hindu editorial “**Arrest the grief**” supports the **Supreme Court’s stay** on Rajasthan’s denotification of **732 hectares of the National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary**. The editorial argues that state governments are bowing to a “**terrifying sand-mining mafia**” at the cost of a critically endangered **lotic ecosystem** — home to the gharial, red-crowned roofed turtle, and the Chambal river system itself. Protecting these species requires enforcement against illegal mining, not legal cover for it.

THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

- 1 **Denotification as legal cover for illegal mining** — Rajasthan’s move to denotify 732 hectares would have legalised mining activity that was already destroying the ecosystem
- 2 **The Supreme Court intervention is necessary but limited** — the SC stay buys time, but cannot replace ground-level enforcement against the sand mining mafia
- 3 **Gharial as flagship species** — the gharial is **Critically Endangered (IUCN)** with only ~650 adults remaining in the wild; the Chambal sanctuary holds the largest population
- 4 **Lotic ecosystems are uniquely vulnerable** — flowing river systems cannot be easily restored once disrupted; sand mining alters river morphology, sediment flow, and fish migration
- 5 **Political economy of sand mining** — the mafia operates with political protection; the editorial calls for breaking this nexus

NATIONAL CHAMBAL GHARIAL SANCTUARY

PARAMETER	DETAILS
Established	1979
Location	Spans Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh
Length	~600 km along the Chambal River
Area	~5,400 sq km
Status	Tri-state protected area (Rajasthan, MP, UP)
Notable species	Gharial, Mugger crocodile, red-crowned roofed turtle, Ganges river dolphin, Indian skimmer

The Chambal River is a tributary of the Yamuna and is one of India's **least polluted rivers** — making it a crucial refuge for aquatic biodiversity.

GHARIAL — CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

PARAMETER	DETAILS
Scientific name	<i>Gavialis gangeticus</i>
IUCN status	Critically Endangered
CITES listing	Appendix I (highest protection)
Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972	Schedule I
Wild population (adults)	~650 individuals globally
Largest population	National Chambal Sanctuary
Distinguishing feature	Long, narrow snout (gharial = “ghara” or pot, referring to bulb at tip of male snout)
Diet	Almost exclusively fish

The gharial is the **only surviving member** of the family Gavialidae — distinct from crocodiles and alligators. Its specialised fish diet makes it exceptionally vulnerable to riverine ecosystem disruption.

SAND MINING — A MASSIVE ILLEGAL ECONOMY

India's **sand mining sector** is governed by:

- **Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957** — sand classified as a “**minor mineral**” → state subject under MMDR Act
- **Sustainable Sand Mining Management Guidelines, 2016** (MoEFCC) — environmental safeguards
- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006** — for projects above certain thresholds
- **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** — monitoring and enforcement

The **scale of the problem**:

- India's annual sand demand: **~700 million tonnes**
- Estimated illegal sand mining: **~50% of total**
- Linked to **construction boom** — sand is essential for cement and concrete
- States most affected: **MP, UP, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh**

LOTIC VS LENTIC ECOSYSTEMS

TYPE	CHARACTERISTIC	EXAMPLES
Lotic	Flowing water	Rivers, streams, springs
Lentic	Standing water	Lakes, ponds, wetlands

The Chambal is a **lotic ecosystem** — its species are adapted to flowing water, sediment dynamics, and seasonal floods. Disrupting these processes through sand mining causes cascading ecological damage that is much harder to reverse than damage to lentic systems.

WHY SAND MINING DEVASTATES RIVER ECOSYSTEMS

- 1 **Riverbed deepening** — removes sand that supports aquatic vegetation
- 2 **Bank erosion** — destabilises riverbanks, threatening adjacent land and forests
- 3 **Sediment flow disruption** — affects downstream agriculture and delta formation
- 4 **Habitat destruction** — gharials nest on sand banks; turtles rely on undisturbed riverbeds

- 5 **Water table decline** — reduces groundwater recharge from the river
- 6 **Fish migration disruption** — physical barriers from mining operations
- 7 **Pollution** — diesel from mining machinery, noise, sediment plumes

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3 — Environment & Ecology

- Sand mining: legal framework, environmental impact, illegal economy
- Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 — Schedule I species
- IUCN Red List: Critically Endangered species
- Lotic vs lentic ecosystems
- Sustainable Sand Mining Guidelines 2016
- Role of NGT in environmental governance

GS Paper 2 — Polity & Governance

- MMDR Act and minor minerals (state subject)
- Centre-State relations in environmental enforcement
- Judicial activism in environmental cases

Mains Probable Questions:

- “Sand mining represents a structural failure of environmental governance in India. Discuss the legal framework and challenges in enforcement.” (250 words)
- “Critically endangered species like the gharial face threats from habitat destruction. Examine the role of protected areas in conservation, and their limitations.” (250 words)

FACTS CORNER

- The **gharial** was once distributed across the Indus, Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Mahanadi river systems — but is now restricted to small populations in just a few rivers (Chambal, Girwa, Ramganga, Mahanadi).
- The **red-crowned roofed turtle** (*Batagur kachuga*) is also Critically Endangered, with the National Chambal Sanctuary being one of its last refuges. Its population was estimated at fewer than 500 adults in 2024.

- **Sand mining lobbies** have been linked to violence against journalists and activists — the killing of journalist Sandeep Sharma in MP (2018) and IPS officer Narendra Kumar in MP (2012) are documented cases.
- The **NGT** has consistently directed states to enforce sustainable sand mining guidelines, including District Survey Reports (DSRs) before any sand mining licence is granted.
- India's **National Mineral Policy 2019** encourages substitution of natural sand with manufactured sand (M-sand) and crushed stone — but adoption has been slow due to construction industry preferences for natural sand.
- The **Indian skimmer** (*Rynchops albicollis*) — another Vulnerable species — also depends on the Chambal sandbanks for breeding, making the sanctuary multi-species critical.

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