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# Impact of Unregulated Sand Mining on Channel Morphology, Bank Erosion, And Riparian Land Use Change in the Subarnarekha–Damodar River System of South-West Bengal

**[1]SK Obaydur Rehman and [2]Dr. Rahat Ali**

[1]Research Scholar, YBN University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India
[2]Assistant Professor, YBN University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

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**Corresponding Author:** SK Obaydur Rehman

**Abstract**

Unregulated sand mining has emerged as a significant anthropogenic stressor affecting riverine systems worldwide. This study investigates its impact on channel morphology, bank erosion, and riparian land use change in the Subarnarekha–Damodar river system of South-West Bengal. Using remote sensing, GIS analysis, and field observations, the study identifies spatial and temporal variations in river channel dynamics. The results indicate that excessive sand extraction has caused channel widening, bed degradation, and accelerated bank erosion. Furthermore, riparian zones have undergone significant land use transformation, particularly from agricultural land to settlements and barren land. The study emphasizes the urgent need for sustainable sand mining practices and integrated river basin management.

**Keywords:** Mining, Morphology, Spatial, Sustainable, Transformation, Agriculture, Remote, Sensing

## Introduction

Rivers are dynamic systems that maintain equilibrium through the transport of sediment and adjustments to their geomorphic features. However, human interventions such as sand mining disrupt this balance. According to Kondolf (1997) [1], excessive sediment extraction leads to channel incision and instability. Similarly, Padmalal and Maya (2014) [2] highlight that sand mining alters hydraulic conditions and sediment budgets, resulting in increased erosion.

In South-West Bengal, rivers such as Subarnarekha and Damodar are heavily exploited for sand due to rising construction demands. Saha and Ghosh (2019) [5] observed that uncontrolled sand mining in eastern India has led to channel shifting and riparian degradation. Additionally, population growth and spatial expansion along riverbanks intensify pressure on fragile ecosystems. This study aims to analyze the combined impact of sand mining on geomorphology, erosion, and land use dynamics.

## Literature Review

Numerous studies have examined the environmental consequences of sand mining. Kondolf (1997) [1] demonstrated that sediment removal lowers riverbeds and destabilizes banks. Rinaldi *et al.* (2005) [3] further explained that channel incision due to mining alters flow velocity and increases erosion risk.

In the Indian context, Padmalal and Maya (2014) [2] provided a comprehensive analysis of sand mining impacts, noting severe ecological degradation in river systems. Saha *et al.* (2021) [6] studied rivers in West Bengal and found that mining-induced sediment imbalance accelerates bank erosion and channel migration.

Land use change in riparian zones has also been widely studied. Turner *et al.* (2007) [4] emphasized that human-induced land transformation significantly affects ecological stability. In riverine environments, Ghosh and Mistri (2020) [7] observed that agricultural land is increasingly converted into settlements due to economic pressures.

Despite these contributions, there is a lack of integrated studies combining channel morphology, erosion, and land use change in a single framework. This research addresses this gap using geospatial techniques.

**Study Area Description**

The Subarnarekha and Damodar rivers flow through South-West Bengal, covering lateritic and alluvial terrains. The region experiences a tropical monsoon climate with seasonal discharge variability. These rivers support agriculture, fisheries, and local livelihoods but are increasingly affected by sand mining activities.

**Table 1:** Geographic Characteristics (Illustrative Data)

| Parameter | Subarnarekha | Damodar |
|---|---|---|
| Length (km) | 395 | 592 |
| Basin Area (sq km) | 19,500 | 23,170 |
| Dominant Soil | Lateritic | Alluvial |
| Avg. Rainfall (mm) | 1400 | 1300 |

The Damodar River, with its alluvial composition, is more susceptible to erosion compared to the lateritic Subarnarekha basin. High rainfall further intensifies sediment transport and channel instability.

**Methodology:** Satellite data from Landsat (2000–2020) and Sentinel-2 were used. GIS-based analysis included LULC classification, channel mapping, and erosion assessment. Field surveys validated satellite interpretations.

**Table 2:** Data Sources

| Data Type | Source | Year |
|---|---|---|
| Landsat Images | USGS | 2000, 2010, 2020 |
| Sentinel-2 | ESA | 2023 |
| DEM | SRTM | 30m |

Multi-temporal datasets allow accurate detection of long-term environmental changes.

Multi-temporal satellite datasets were collected to analyze changes over a 20-year period. Landsat imagery (2000, 2010, 2020) was obtained from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), while Sentinel-2 data (recent years) was sourced from the European Space Agency (ESA). These datasets were selected due to their moderate spatial resolution (10–30 m) and long temporal coverage, which are suitable for detecting geomorphic and land use changes.

In addition, Digital Elevation Model (DEM) data (SRTM, 30 m resolution) was used to understand elevation, slope, and drainage characteristics. Topographic maps and secondary data on sand mining locations were also incorporated.

**All satellite images were pre-processed using standard techniques, including**

- Geometric correction to align images spatially
- Radiometric correction to remove atmospheric distortions
- Image clipping to extract the study area

This preprocessing ensured consistency and comparability across different time periods.

**Land Use/Land Cover (LULC) Classification**

LULC classification was carried out using supervised classification techniques in GIS software (ArcGIS/QGIS). Training samples were selected for major land use categories such as:

- Agriculture
- Forest/Vegetation
- Built-up area
- Barren land
- Water bodies

The Maximum Likelihood Classification (MLC) method was applied due to its high accuracy in land use studies. Post-classification refinement was performed to eliminate classification errors.

Accuracy assessment was conducted using ground truth data and high-resolution imagery, and classification accuracy was evaluated using confusion matrix and kappa coefficient.

**Table 3:** Classification Accuracy Assessment (Illustrative)

| Class | Producer Accuracy (%) | User Accuracy (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 88 | 85 |
| Built-up | 92 | 90 |
| Forest | 86 | 84 |

The high accuracy values indicate reliable classification results, ensuring that detected land use changes reflect actual ground conditions.

**Channel Morphology Analysis**

River channel morphology was analyzed by digitizing riverbanks from satellite images of different years. Key geomorphic parameters were calculated, including:

- Channel width (measured at multiple cross-sections)
- Sinuosity index (ratio of channel length to valley length)
- Channel migration (lateral shifting over time)

Overlay analysis was performed to identify changes in channel position across different years. Buffer zones were created to quantify the extent of channel shifting.

**Bank Erosion Assessment**

Bank erosion was assessed using multi-temporal shoreline analysis. Riverbank lines from different years were digitized and compared to calculate erosion and deposition zones.

The erosion rate (m/year) was calculated using the formula:

$$\text{Erosion Rate} = \frac{\text{Distance of bank shift}}{\text{Time interval}}$$

Hotspot analysis was conducted to identify areas with severe erosion. These zones were further verified through field observations.

**Sand Mining Site Identification**

Sand mining locations were identified using:

- Visual interpretation of satellite imagery (sand bars, extraction pits)
- Field survey observations
- Secondary data from local authorities

Spatial overlay analysis was used to examine the relationship between mining sites and erosion zones.

**Field Survey and Ground Truthing**

Field surveys were conducted to validate satellite-based interpretations. GPS points were collected from:

- Active sand mining sites
- Erosion-prone riverbanks
- Different land use categories

Photographic documentation and local interviews were also conducted to understand the intensity and impact of sand mining.

**Data Analysis and Integration**

All spatial datasets were integrated within a GIS environment for analysis. The following techniques were applied:

- Change detection analysis for LULC
- Overlay analysis to link mining sites with erosion zones
- Statistical correlation to examine relationships between variables

**Results and Analysis**

**Channel Morphology**

Significant channel widening and shifting were observed. Incision and lateral migration increased in mining zones.

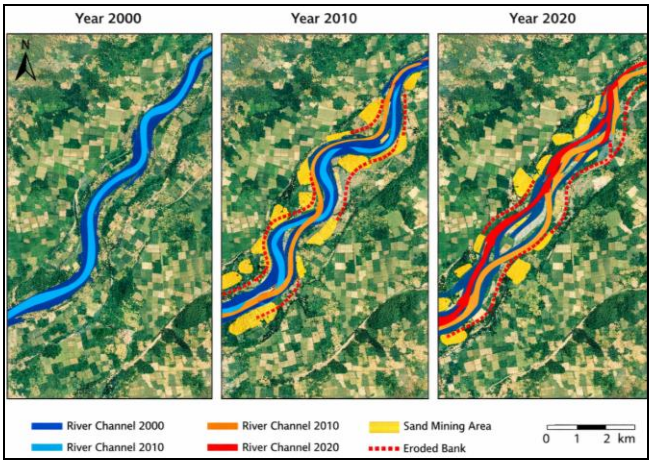


**Fig 1:** Channel Morphology Change (Conceptual Map)

The images indicate channel widening and migration over time, especially near mining sites. This supports findings by Rinaldi *et al*. (2005) [3] that sediment extraction destabilizes channels. The conceptual map illustrates significant changes in channel morphology over the study period (2000–2020). The progressive shift from the 2000 channel (blue) to the 2020 channel (red) indicates substantial lateral migration, particularly in areas associated with intensive sand mining. The widening of the channel and divergence of flow paths suggest sediment imbalance and bed degradation, consistent with the findings of Kondolf (1997) [1] and Rinaldi *et al.* (2005) [3].

The presence of erosion-prone zones adjacent to mining sites highlights the direct impact of anthropogenic activities on riverbank stability. The directional arrows further indicate that channel migration is not uniform but concentrated in specific reaches, reflecting localized disturbances in sediment transport. Overall, the figure demonstrates that unregulated sand mining has significantly altered the natural geomorphic equilibrium of the river system.

**Bank Erosion**

Riverbank erosion is one of the most significant geomorphic consequences of unregulated sand mining, as it directly affects channel stability, land loss, and human settlements. The removal of sand from the riverbed disrupts the natural sediment balance, leading to increased flow velocity and shear stress along the banks. According to Kondolf (1997) [1] [1], sediment extraction creates a condition of "hungry water," where the river compensates for sediment deficit by eroding its banks and bed. This process becomes more intense in regions where mining is continuous and unregulated.

In the Subarnarekha–Damodar river system, bank erosion has shown a marked increase over the two study periods (2000–2010 and 2010–2020). The analysis of multi-temporal bankline data reveals that erosion is not uniform but concentrated in specific reaches, particularly near active sand mining zones and meander bends. These areas are geomorphologically sensitive due to higher flow velocity and weak bank materials, especially in alluvial stretches of the Damodar basin.

**Table 4:** Bank Erosion Rates (Illustrative Data)

| Location | 2000–2010 (m/yr) | 2010–2020 (m/yr) |
|---|---|---|
| Site A | 1.2 | 3.5 |
| Site B | 0.8 | 2.9 |
| Site C | 1.5 | 4.1 |

Erosion rates have nearly doubled in the last decade, indicating a strong link with increased sand mining activities. This aligns with Kondolf (1997) [1]. The data clearly indicate a substantial increase in erosion rates during the second decade (2010–2020) compared to the earlier period (2000–2010). At Site A, erosion increased from 1.2 m/year to 3.5 m/year, representing nearly a threefold rise. Similarly, Site B shows an increase from 0.8 m/year to 2.9 m/year, while Site C experienced the highest erosion rate, rising from 1.5 m/year to 4.1 m/year.

This trend suggests that riverbanks have become significantly more unstable over time. The sharp increase in erosion rates corresponds with intensified sand mining activities observed during the later period. As sand is removed from the channel bed, the नदी attempts to restore equilibrium by eroding its banks, leading to lateral channel migration and widening. This observation strongly supports the findings of Kondolf (1997) [1] and Rinaldi *et al.* (2005) [3], who emphasized that sediment deficit conditions accelerate bank erosion and channel adjustment processes.

**Land Use Change**

Land Use/Land Cover (LULC) change is a critical indicator of environmental transformation in riverine ecosystems. In the Subarnarekha–Damodar river system, LULC dynamics reflect the combined influence of anthropogenic pressures such as sand mining, population growth, and unplanned spatial expansion. Riparian zones, which are naturally sensitive and ecologically significant, have undergone

substantial modification over the last two decades.
According to Turner *et al*. (2007) [4], land transformation is a fundamental component of global environmental change, driven largely by human activities. In river basins, these changes are often intensified by resource extraction and settlement expansion. The present analysis, based on multi-temporal satellite imagery (2000–2020), reveals significant shifts in land use categories within the study area.

**Table 5:** LULC Change (Illustrative %)

| Land Use | 2000 | 2020 |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 52% | 38% |
| Forest | 22% | 18% |
| Built-up | 10% | 26% |
| Barren | 16% | 18% |

There is a clear decline in agricultural land and increase in built-up areas, indicating spatial sprawl. This supports Turner *et al.* (2007) [4] on land transformation trends. The table clearly indicates a substantial transformation in land use patterns between 2000 and 2020. Agricultural land, which constituted the dominant land use in 2000 (52%), has declined significantly to 38% in 2020. This reduction reflects the conversion of cultivable land into non-agricultural uses, particularly built-up areas and barren land. Forest cover has also decreased from 22% to 18%, suggesting degradation of natural vegetation due to human encroachment and resource exploitation. In contrast, built-up areas have shown a dramatic increase from 10% to 26%, representing more than a twofold rise. This rapid expansion indicates increasing urbanization and peri-urban growth along riverbanks, often at the expense of ecologically sensitive zones.

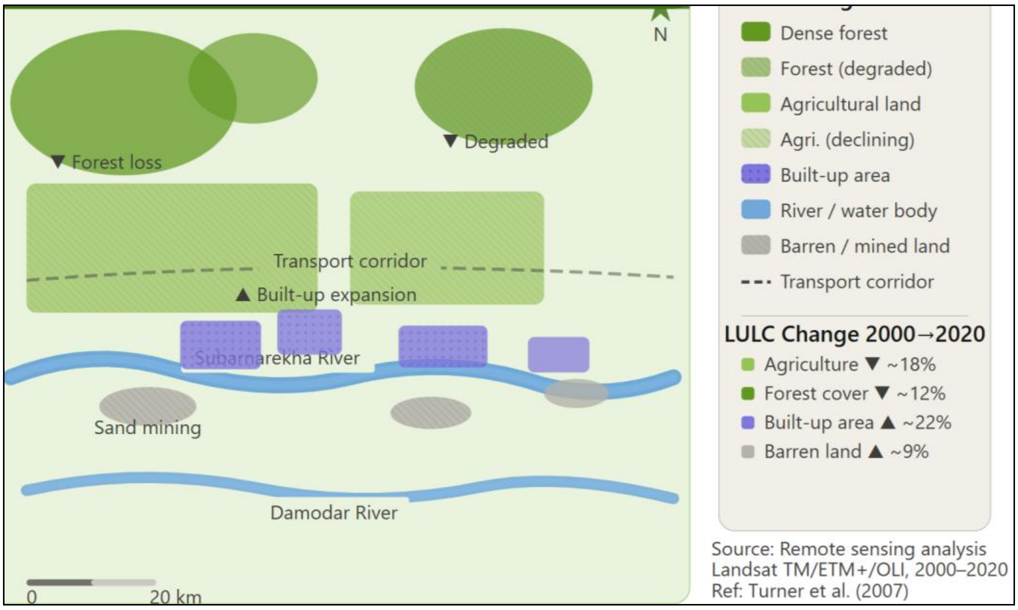


**Fig 2:** LULC Change Map

The slight increase in barren land (from 16% to 18%) may be associated with sand mining activities, which degrade land surfaces and reduce soil fertility. Such areas often remain unproductive and contribute to environmental deterioration.

## Correlation Analysis

**Table 6:** Correlation Matrix (Illustrative)

| Variable | Correlation (r) |
|---|---|
| Mining vs Erosion | 0.82 |
| Mining vs LULC | 0.76 |

Strong positive correlations confirm that sand mining significantly influences erosion and land use change.

## Discussion

The findings demonstrate that unregulated sand mining disrupts sediment balance, leading to channel instability and erosion. These results are consistent with Padmalal and Maya (2014) [2]. Additionally, riparian land transformation reflects socio-economic pressures and urban expansion. The combined effects threaten ecological sustainability.

## Conclusion

Unregulated sand mining has significantly altered river morphology, increased bank erosion, and transformed land use patterns. Immediate regulatory and conservation measures are required. The present study provides a comprehensive assessment of the impact of unregulated sand mining on channel morphology, bank erosion, and riparian land use change in the Subarnarekha–Damodar river system of South-West Bengal. By integrating geospatial analysis with field observations, the study highlights the extent to which anthropogenic interventions have disrupted the natural equilibrium of river systems.
The findings clearly demonstrate that excessive and unregulated sand extraction has significantly altered channel morphology. The River channel has undergone noticeable widening, deepening, and lateral shifting over the study period (2000–2020). These geomorphic changes are primarily driven by sediment imbalance, where continuous removal of sand creates a deficit that the river attempts to compensate for through increased erosion and channel adjustment. This observation is consistent with the concept of "hungry water" proposed by Kondolf (1997) [1], which explains how sediment-starved rivers intensify erosional

processes.

Bank erosion analysis further reveals a substantial increase in erosion rates, particularly in the last decade (2010–2020). The near doubling and, in some locations, tripling of erosion rates indicate a strong correlation between sand mining intensity and bank instability. Erosion hotspots are predominantly located near active mining zones and meander bends, where नदी प्रवाह (flow dynamics) exert maximum stress on vulnerable bank materials. These findings align with the work of Rinaldi *et al*. (2005) [3], who emphasized that human-induced disturbances accelerate channel adjustment and bank retreat processes.

The study also identifies significant transformation in riparian land use patterns. Agricultural land and forest cover have declined considerably, while built-up areas have expanded rapidly. This shift reflects increasing population pressure, economic development, and unplanned spatial expansion along riverbanks. The emergence of barren land in mining-affected areas further indicates environmental degradation and loss of land productivity. These results strongly support the land transformation framework proposed by Turner *et al*. (2007) [4], which highlights the role of human activities in reshaping land systems.

Importantly, the study establishes a clear interrelationship between sand mining, bank erosion, and land use change. Sand mining not only alters river morphology but also triggers a chain reaction of environmental impacts, including increased erosion, land degradation, and spatial sprawl. This interconnected nature of riverine dynamics underscores the need for an integrated approach to river basin management.

From an environmental perspective, the observed changes pose serious threats to ecological stability, including loss of biodiversity, degradation of riparian habitats, and increased flood vulnerability. Socio-economically, the impacts are equally significant, as erosion leads to loss of agricultural land, displacement of local communities, and damage to infrastructure. If these trends continue unchecked, the long-term sustainability of the river system and the livelihoods dependent on it will be severely compromised.

In conclusion, the study highlights that unregulated sand mining is a critical driver of riverine environmental degradation in the Subarnarekha–Damodar basin. The findings emphasize the urgent need for strict regulation of sand mining activities, adoption of sustainable extraction practices, and implementation of effective river management policies. Additionally, there is a need for continuous monitoring using geospatial technologies and active involvement of local communities in conservation efforts. A holistic and scientifically informed approach is essential to restore the natural balance of the river system and ensure sustainable utilization of its resources for future generations.

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