



The 'mafias' terrorising Indians and pillaging the environment as government corruption flourishes

By South Asia correspondent James Bennett

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Rampant corruption is paving the way for violence, lawlessness and environmental damage in India.

Baba Umar walks through bulldozed foundations that were to be his new home, to the location of a chilling attack on his mother.

Pointing to dried blood still visible on some grass, he recounts the details.

"These guys, they came with steel rods, shovels, axe, and they beat my mother ruthlessly," he said.

The attackers were so-called "land mafia", based in his city of Srinagar, Kashmir.

"They've been trying to forcibly grab this piece of land from us," Mr Umar said.

"They don't have any papers, they don't have any valid document, they're just trying to pressure us.

"There are many people here who just left their land, and then these guys [the mafias] sold these lands."

After his family refused the thugs' demands for money, for the privilege of building on their own land, Mr Umar's mother was set upon.

Neighbour Hanan Bazaz said he and his father saw the incident unfold.

"We came for [sic] help and we took her to the hospital," he said.

Asked if he was scared, Mr Bazaz replied, "yeah, absolutely".

But Mr Umar credits his neighbour for saving his mother's life.

"If it wasn't for these guys, my mother would have been dead this time," he said.

The gang returned that night, bulldozing the wall and foundations the Babas had already built.

Their brazen tactics are the result of an impunity, built on networks of corrupt police and politicians.

"These guys they work in tandem with officials from police, judiciary, revenue officials. They can seek patronage from the political parties as well," Mr Umar said.

Saffron industry also under threat

PHOTO: Baba Umar (R) said thugs had tried to grab land owned by himself and his mother. (ABC News)

MAP: India

00:00

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AUDIO: Corruption allows land mafia to build where they want in India (AM)

Key points:

- Corrupt police and politicians allow gangs to seize land
- Lucrative saffron plantations under threat from illegal construction
- Government says culture of corruption is changing



PHOTO: Illegal construction is threatening the saffron plantations, growers say. (ABC News)

Saffron, lucrative and able to flourish in only a few locations worldwide, is also under threat.

In the villages surrounding Srinagar, growers of the delicate flowers say the government is turning a blind eye.

Saffron grower Shabeeh Farooq shows the ABC homes, built where the plants once grew.

"It is all illegal construction here, built on saffron fields," he said, driving through a village near Pampore, just to the south of Srinagar.

Officially the land is protected. But illegal houses are encroaching on the fields and Mr Farooq is straightforward about why.

"This land mafia business is flourishing because everyone here is corrupted," he said.

"Everyone takes a cut and turns a blind eye on the illegal constructions. The Government doesn't listen to us."

A mafia for everything

The gangs do not stop there either.

In the mountains above Srinagar "timber mafia" log trees on public land, while in the valley below in broad daylight an excavator gouges out the banks of the river Jellum.

Truckload after truckload of sand are carted away to feed cement-making and construction.

"Sand mafia" are found right across India, doing as they please and driven by a combination of lax environmental law and runaway demand from an economy growing at 7.5 per cent a year.

Nadreem Quadri, a Kashmiri environmental lawyer, said if permission was sought it was almost always under the table.

"Most of the work is illegal, most of the work is without official approvals but definitely under a political patronage," he said.



PHOTO: An excavator works on the banks of the river Jellum. (ABC News)

Mr Quadri said the fact that so many people stood to gain made the graft extremely difficult to halt.

"The money which is being collected from the economic activity of all these trades, doesn't have one partner only, it has multiple stakeholders," he said.

"There are recorded statements in the high court that this cannot be possible without the political patronage and the state government support."

Government says it will fire corrupt officials

But the Jammu and Kashmir Government says, in a region long defined by insurgency and contested by India and Pakistan, things are not that simple.

The **Chief Minister's spokesman Wahid Parra readily concedes** that gangs operate with political and police protection, but says that is changing.

"They enjoyed support of police, sometimes they enjoyed support of government as well but now our priorities are very similar, we are trying to address all public grievances," Mr Parra said.

It's a challenge, because it's a virus in the society. It's in our blood.

Government spokesman Wahid Parra

The ability to make money through bribes is one reason that government jobs in India are highly prized.

It is also rare for people to be fired.

But Mr Parra said the government of the chief minister was trying to change the culture of impunity by doing just that.

"We have sacked 60 people who are facing the corruption charges. It has never happened in any Indian state," he said, adding that further sackings would follow.

"It's a challenge, because **it's a virus in the society. It's in our blood,**" he said of the culture of paying officials.

As Baba Umar headed to court to submit evidence of his mother's injuries, he agreed.

I've taken a pledge, I will not budge.

"I know the Government is trying to check corruption but it's not possible here," he said.

Baba Umar

Mr Umar is prepared for years of legal fighting in his family's case, but said he did not expect major change anytime soon.

"It's widespread ... people have internalised it, they can get small things done, and I don't think its going to go away quickly," he said.

"I've taken a pledge, I will not budge."

Topics: crime, world-politics, environment, corruption, india

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