World Journal of Biology Pharmacy and Health Sciences
eISSN: 2582-5542
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjbphs
Journal homepage: https://wjbphs.com/

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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# Comparative evaluation of the adverse effects wastewater effluents on *Channa punctata* through oxidative stress and histopathological alterations

Virendra Kushwah [1], Bhawna Srivastava [2] and Reddy, P.B [1,*]

[1] *Department of Zoology. Government PG College. Ratlam. M. P, India.*
[2] *Department of Zoology, DAV College. Kanpur. U.P, India.*

World Journal of Biology Pharmacy and Health Sciences, 2024, 20(03), 541-551

Publication history: Received on 16 November 2024; revised on 23 December 2024; accepted on 26 December 2024

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjbphs.2024.20.3.1081

## Abstract

This study investigates the adverse effects of wastewater effluents on *Channa punctata*, collected from upstream (Methwasa), point-source (Juna Nagda), and downstream (Parmarkheri) locations along the Chambal River at Nagda, Ujjain, India. The research focuses on oxidative stress responses and histopathological alterations in fish gills, liver, and kidneys. Catalase and glutathione S-transferase activities were significantly higher at Juna Nagda and Parmarkheri compared to the upstream site (Methwasa) ($p < 0.05$), suggesting the activation of antioxidant defense mechanisms due to pollution exposure. Histological analysis revealed the most severe tissue damage in fish from Juna Nagda, followed by Parmarkheri and Methwasa. The Integrated Biomarker Response (IBR) for oxidative stress and histopathological changes consistently indicated higher values at the polluted sites. Water temperature, electrical conductivity (EC), and nitrate levels were identified as potential factors influencing these biomarker responses. The study concludes that thermal effluents discharged into Juna Nagda are responsible for the observed effects. Overall, integrated biomarkers, particularly histopathological alterations, offer a reliable tool for monitoring the prolonged impacts of wastewater effluents on aquatic organisms.

**Keywords:** *Channa punctata*; Wastewater effluents; Oxidative stress; Histopathology; Biomarkers; Chambal River; Integrated Biomarker Response; Pollution

## 1. Introduction

Wastewater effluents discharged from industrial and domestic wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) contain a complex mixture of pollutants, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), solvents, heavy metals, pharmaceuticals, and flame retardants, all of which pose significant threats to aquatic ecosystems (Barber et al., 2019). While inventory-based chemical monitoring provides useful data on the presence of pollutants, it offers limited insights into their biological significance and ecological impact (Di Toro et al., 2020). Recent studies have emphasized the need for evaluating the causal relationships between contaminant exposure and biological consequences, with growing focus on how these pollutants impact aquatic organisms (Oakes et al., 2021). Wastewater effluents are known to induce various physiological effects, including oxidative stress, immune responses, and estrogenic effects in fish exposed to contaminated water bodies (Sahu et al., 2020; Dhanakumar et al., 2019).

Fish serve as reliable indicators of environmental stress and provide valuable endpoints for assessing the biological impacts of xenobiotic exposure (Tornero et al., 2018). Oxidative stress, marked by the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), is a prominent response of fish to wastewater effluents (Pereira et al., 2020). Under natural conditions, ROS play beneficial roles in metabolism, but when present in excess, they can cause damage such as lipid peroxidation (LPO) (Lushchak, 2018). The production of ROS also triggers antioxidant defense mechanisms, notably through enzymes like catalase (CAT) and glutathione S-transferases (GST), which can be used as biomarkers for early-stage

* Corresponding author: Reddy, P.B

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detection of wastewater effluent impacts (Nero et al., 2021). Histopathological biomarkers are equally crucial, offering insights into cellular and tissue-level damage due to xenobiotic exposure and reflecting cumulative biochemical and physiological alterations (Moussa et al., 2019).

Given the complexity of pollutant mixtures, no single biomarker can fully diagnose the effects of effluent exposure on aquatic organisms. Therefore, a battery of complementary biomarkers is recommended to provide a comprehensive assessment (Perez et al., 2020). The integrated biomarker response (IBR) approach has proven useful in toxicological studies, offering a quantitative method for evaluating the collective responses of multiple biomarkers to contaminant exposure (Van der Oost et al., 2003). The IBR index has been successfully applied in various environmental monitoring programs, including assessing the seasonal and spatial variations of contamination in estuaries (Serafim et al., 2016). However, while molecular and biochemical biomarkers are commonly used in IBR studies, histopathological alterations are more directly indicative of the adverse effects of contaminants on aquatic organisms (Schwaiger et al., 2021).

This study aims to investigate the adverse outcomes of domestic, industrial, and hot spring effluents on fish by integrating oxidative stress and histopathological alterations in the gills, liver, and kidneys of *Channa punctata* (spotted snakehead) from three sites along the Chambal River at Nagda, India. These sites, including Methwasa (upstream), Juna Nagda (point source), and Parmarkheri (downstream), were chosen due to their dominance in the river system and their recognition as sentinel species in biological monitoring programs (Reddy et al., 2023). The investigation of these biomarkers offers valuable insights into the ecological impacts of effluent contamination in freshwater ecosystems.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study area

The Chambal River, particularly in the Nagda region of Ujjain district, Madhya Pradesh, is severely polluted by industrial and domestic effluents. This pollution, centered around 23.5°N 75.5°E, threatens water quality, aquatic life, and public health. The Chambal River near Nagda, India, is polluted by industrial and domestic wastewater. Three study sites were selected: Methwasa (upstream, clean), Juna Nagda (effluent entry point, highly polluted), and Parmarkheri (downstream, partially polluted).

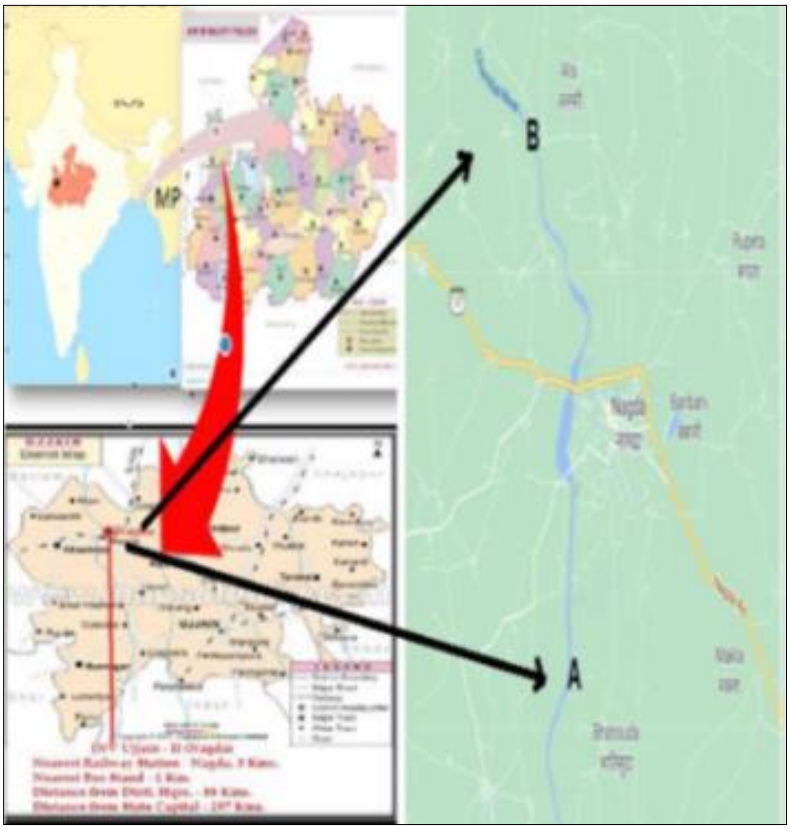



**Figure 1** The sampling points of study location at Nagda. Ujjain

- **Water Sampling**: The study, conducted in December 2023 during winter, involved sampling at sites along the river when the average monthly water level was 3.95 meters. Samples were collected early in the morning to minimize human activity interference. Two 1-liter samples were taken from each site using rinsed, airtight plastic bottles—one for measuring dissolved oxygen and the other for analyzing anions, cations, and other chemical parameters. Following APHA (2005) guidelines, samples were filtered using a 0.45 µm membrane to remove particulate matter, sealed, labeled, and transported in ice bags to maintain stability. Analysis was carried out within six hours of collection, with a maximum transport time of one hour. Parameters analyzed included temperature, pH, electrical conductivity (EC), alkalinity, dissolved oxygen (DO), total dissolved solids (TDS), total hardness (TH), nitrates, chloride, phosphate, and sulfate. All measurements were performed according to APHA (1998) standards and compared against the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) permissible limits for drinking water.
- **Fish Collection**: Live adult *Channa punctatus* (Hamilton, 1822) fish of similar size and weight, regardless of sex, were collected from the upstream and downstream zones of the Chambal River at Nagda, Ujjain, India (23°27'N, 75°25'E) during winter months. A total of 24 exposed fish (average length 14.2 ± 0.8 cm; average weight 69.1 ± 1.3 g) and 20 reference fish (average length 14.5 ± 0.92 cm; average weight 74.28 ± 1.4 g) were captured using a cast net with the assistance of skilled local fishermen. The fish were transported in water-filled buckets to the laboratory, washed, and euthanized with benzocaine (0.1 g/L). After dissection, the tissues were analyzed for antioxidant enzymes, non-enzymatic parameters, lipid peroxidation (LPO), and histopathology. Four fish were selected for oxidative stress and histopathological analysis. The reference fish were collected from an upstream area of the river, known for its relatively clean water quality with no significant pollution sources, ensuring it was suitable as a baseline for comparison.
- **Histopathology**: Fish tissues (liver, gills, and kidneys) were collected, washed, and immediately fixed in 4% calcium formal fixative at 4°C for one week. The tissues were dehydrated using graded ethanol, cleared in xylene, and embedded in paraffin wax at 60°C. Sections of 7 µm thickness were prepared using a rotary microtome and stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E). Tissue samples from both reference and polluted sites were processed following Humason's (1979) protocols. For each site, 10 fish were analyzed, with three slides per organ per fish, resulting in 30 slides per organ per site. Histopathological changes, including hypertrophy, necrosis, and other pathological alterations, were examined under a light microscope (Olympus CH20iBIMF). Photomicrographs of stained slides were captured using a Magnus microscopic camera (Model FMA050) for documentation and further analysis. This approach provided a detailed comparison of cellular and morphological changes between reference and polluted site tissues, highlighting the impact of pollution on fish health at the tissue level.
- **Tissue Oxidative stress biomarkers**: Fish tissues (gill, liver, and kidney) were excised, rinsed with phosphate buffer, and homogenized in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) to prepare 10% homogenates. The homogenates were centrifuged at 10,000 rpm for 10 minutes at 4°C, and the supernatant was stored at -20°C for analysis. Oxidative stress markers were evaluated using enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidant parameters. Enzymatic assays included Superoxide Dismutase (SOD), measured by its inhibition of pyrogallol auto-oxidation (Marklund and Marklund, 1974), Catalase (CAT), assessed via hydrogen peroxide decomposition (Claiborne, 1985), and Glutathione S-Transferase (GST), determined through its reaction with CDNB (Habig et al., 1974). Non-enzymatic markers included Reduced Glutathione (GSH), quantified by its reaction with DTNB (Jollow et al., 1974), and Lipid Peroxidation (LPO), measured as thiobarbituric acid-reactive substances (TBARS), following Buege and Aust (1978). All assays used spectrophotometric readings, with enzyme activities expressed as units per mg of protein and oxidative stress indicators evaluated against standard curves. These analyses provided insights into biochemical disruptions caused by oxidative stress in fish exposed to wastewater effluents.
- **Statistical Analysis**: Data were presented as mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM), with all experiments conducted in triplicates to enhance reliability. Differences between reference and exposed groups were analyzed using a Student's *t*-test in Microsoft Excel (version 365). A $p$-value < 0.05 was deemed significant, suggesting the observed differences were unlikely due to chance, while a $p$-value < 0.01 indicated highly significant differences. This statistical approach ensured a robust evaluation of the impact of wastewater exposure on fish health.

## 3. Results

The study aimed to investigate oxidative stress, histopathological, biochemical, and hematological disruptions in *Channa punctata* exposed to industrial and municipal wastewater discharges in the Chambal River at Nagda, Madhya Pradesh, India.

### 3.1. Water quality Parameters

Water quality, influenced by natural factors and human activities, was assessed through physicochemical analysis of surface water samples from three locations: Methwasa (upstream reference site), Juna Nagda (point source), and Parmarkheri (downstream). Eleven key physicochemical parameters were measured to evaluate the water's suitability for domestic and drinking purposes. Results, detailed in Table 1, include analyses conducted before and after the field experiment.

The analysis of physicochemical parameters from the three study sites—Methwasa (reference), Juna Nagda (point source), and Parmarkheri (downstream)—reveals significant variations, highlighting the impact of industrial and municipal discharges. Temperature across sites remained relatively stable, but electrical conductivity (EC) was notably higher at Juna Nagda (1994.3 µmhos/cm) and Parmarkheri (1425.7 µmhos/cm) compared to Methwasa (890.2 µmhos/cm), exceeding WHO's recommended limit at Juna Nagda. pH values were within permissible limits except at Juna Nagda (8.8), which approached the upper limit. Dissolved oxygen (DO) was markedly reduced at Juna Nagda (4.12 mg/l), indicating pollution stress, while Methwasa maintained suitable levels (6.9 mg/l).

Total dissolved solids (TDS) and total hardness (TH) also spiked significantly at Juna Nagda (1098.3 mg/l and 586.2 mg/l, respectively), exceeding BIS standards. Nitrate levels were concerning at all sites, particularly at Juna Nagda (105.6 mg/l), far surpassing the 45 mg/l maximum permissible limit, signaling nutrient pollution. Chloride concentrations were alarmingly high at Juna Nagda (1125.2 mg/l), exceeding permissible limits, while Methwasa and Parmarkheri recorded moderate levels. Phosphate and sulfate levels were elevated at Juna Nagda (1.88 ppm and 578.9 mg/l, respectively), exceeding their respective limits and reflecting contamination from industrial effluents.

**Table 1** Physicochemical parameters that were determined at different study locations of Chambal River at Nagda. The mean ± SEM is used to express values. Signific. ant changes are signified by different marks ($p < 0.05$)

| **Parameters** | **Methwasa (Reference site)** | **Juna Nagda (Point Source)** | **Parmarkheri (Downstream)** | **ISO10500:12 BIS STANDARDS (1983)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Temp (0C) | 19.54 ± 0.22 | 20.3 ±0.2 | 20.27 ± 0.2 | ----- |
| EC (µmhos/cm) | 890.2 ± 8.84 | 1994.3±8.5 | 1425.7 ± 10.6 | 1,500 (WHO 82004). |
| pH | 7.3 ± 0.14 | 8.8 ±0.2 | 7.9 ± 0.3 | 6.5-8.5 |
| Total Alkalinity (mg/l) | 184.6 ± 5.92 | 519.26 ±5.54 | 499.2 ±5.54 | 200-600 |
| DO | 6.9 ± 0.2 | 4.12±0.30 | 5.9 ±0.30 | 6.5-8.5 |
| TDS (mg/l) | 288.4 ± 4.1 | 1098.3 ±3.0 | 923.02 ±3.0 | 300-500 |
| TH (mg/l) | 194.2 ±2.8 | 586.2±8.9 | 213.5 ±9.9 | 200-300 |
| Nitrate ( NO3 ), mg/l | 78.2 ± 3.88 | 105.6 ± 4.2 | 86.6 ± 3.2 | 45 Max |
| Chloride (Cl) mg/l | 202.3 ± 3.8 | 1125.2±8.32 | 363.2 ± 8.3 | 250 |
| Phosphate (ppm) | 0.08 ± 0.01 | 1.88 ± 0.01 | 1.1 ± 0.01 | 0.06-1.0 |
| Sulphate ($SO_4$) mg/l | 148.2 ± 3.64 | 578.9 ±5.2 | 289.6 ± 4.8 | 250 |

Overall, the results demonstrate significant degradation of water quality at Juna Nagda due to pollutant discharges, with partial improvement downstream at Parmarkheri, though several parameters remained above recommended thresholds. Methwasa's data indicate baseline conditions suitable for reference comparison.

**Histopathological Biomarkers**: The histological analysis of the liver, kidney, and gills from the three study sites—reference site (Methwasa), point source (Juna Nagda), and downstream site (Parmarkheri)—reveals a clear progression of tissue damage associated with pollution exposure.

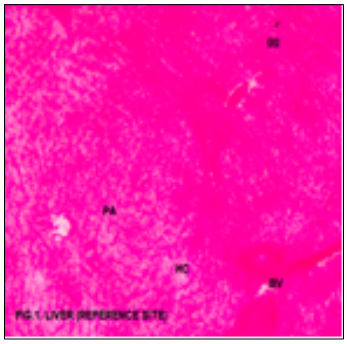
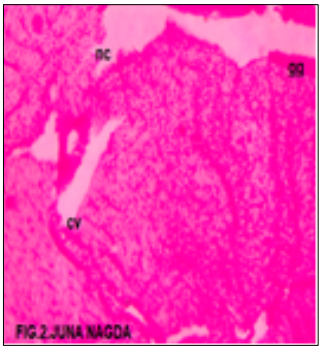
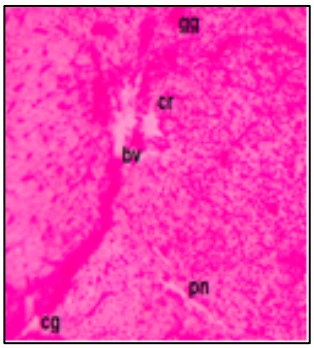
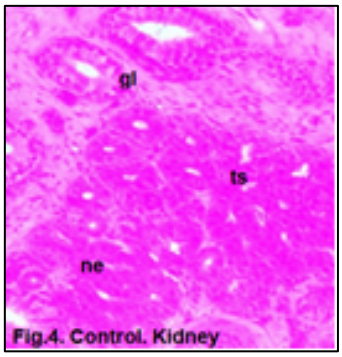
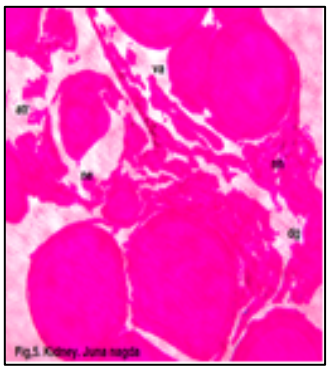
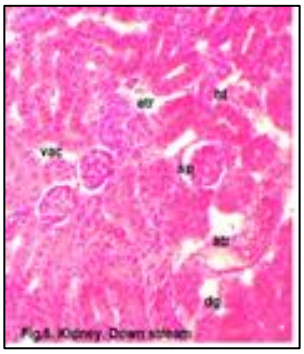
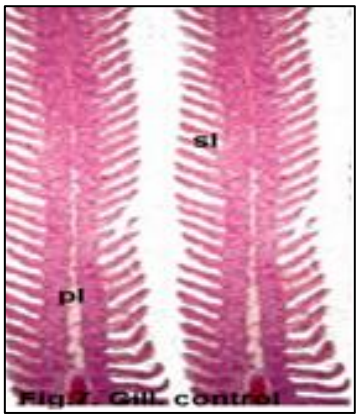
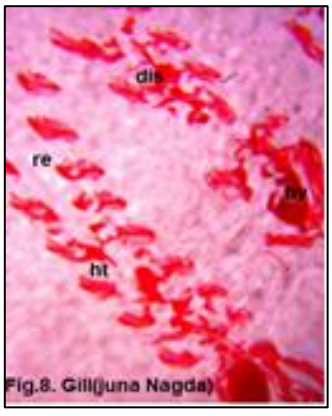
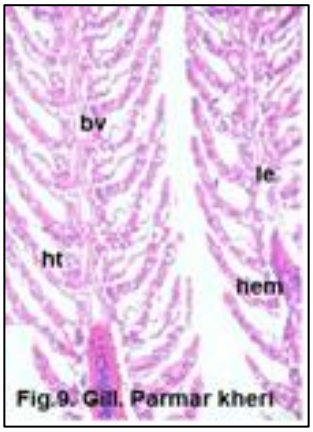
| | Methwasa (Upstream | Juna Nagda (Point source) | Parmar Kheri (Downstream) |
|---|---|---|---|
| LIVER |  |  |  |
| | Exhibited normal structure with hepatocytes (hc), parenchyma (pa), blood vessels (bv)and glycogen granules (gg) | Exhibited advance damage with necrosis (nc), clogged vessels (cv), cellular rupture (cr) and cellular vacuolation (cv). | Exhibited congestion (cg), pyknotic nucleus(pn), and cytoplasmic degeneration (cd). |
| KIDNEY |  |  |  |
| | Exhibited a normal structural organization with functional nephrons (ne), glomeruli (gl), and tubular systems (ts). | Exhibited atrophic (atr) nephrocytes, degenerative changes (dg), dilation of glomerular capsules and vacuole formation (va). | Exhibited cellular and nuclear hypertrophy (ht), and cytoplasmic vacuolation (vac), decreased Bowman's capsule space, and tubular degeneration (dg) |
| GILLS |  |  |  |
| | Exhibited a normal structural organization, with intact primary (pl) and secondary lamellae (sl), a central venous sinus, chloride cells, and pillar cells. | Displayed progressive damage, including lifting of the respiratory epithelium (re), hypertrophy (ht), and clogged blood vessels (cbv). | Gills showed hypertrophy (ht) of the respiratory epithelium (re), hemorrhage (hem), rupture of the lamellar epithelium, and excessive mucus production |

**Figure 2** Photomicrographs of hepatic, renal and gill tissues exposed to wastewaters of Chambal River at Nagda

- **Liver:** The reference site exhibited normal liver histology with well-defined hepatocytes, intact glycogen granules, and regular nuclear structure. However, at Juna Nagda, significant damage was observed, including blood vessel congestion, nuclear degeneration, and cytoplasmic vacuolation. Glycogen granules were reduced, indicating metabolic disruption. At Parmarkheri, pathological changes worsened, with cytoplasmic vacuolation, focal necrosis, and eosinophilic granules. Glycogen granules were nearly absent, signifying severe metabolic impairment.
- **Kidney:** At Methwasa, the kidney demonstrated a healthy structural organization with functional nephrons and intact tubular systems. In contrast, Juna Nagda showed severe alterations, including glomerular capillary dilation, nuclear hypertrophy, and tubular degeneration, leading to reduced lumen size. Downstream at Parmarkheri, damage persisted with atrophic nephrocytes and vacuole formation, though the extent of damage was relatively less severe compared to Juna Nagda, indicating partial recovery.
- **Gills:** Reference site gills displayed a normal lamellar structure, supporting efficient respiration. At Juna Nagda, damage was characterized by epithelial lifting, hypertrophy, and clogged blood vessels, disrupting respiratory efficiency. Parmarkheri gills showed advanced damage, including hemorrhage, lamellar rupture, and excessive mucus production, indicative of prolonged pollutant exposure.

In summary, histological changes progressed from mild at the reference site to severe at the point source and downstream sites, clearly correlating with the level of pollutant exposure and emphasizing the adverse effects of industrial discharges on aquatic health.

### 3.2. Oxidative stress biomarkers

**Lipid peroxidation:** The results of the lipid peroxidation assay, measured as malondialdehyde (MDA) levels, indicate a significant increase in oxidative stress in fish tissues exposed to pollution at Juna Nagda and Parmarkheri compared to the reference site at Methwasa.

Liver: MDA levels increased dramatically at Juna Nagda (39.3 ± 3.1 nmol/mg protein) with a percentage change of 372.924% compared to the reference site (8.1 ± 0.01 nmol/mg protein). At Parmarkheri, MDA levels were slightly lower (37.1 ± 2.2 nmol/mg protein) but still showed a substantial increase of 346.45%.

Kidney: The kidney exhibited a 181.818% rise in lipid peroxidation at Juna Nagda (18.6 ± 2.1 nmol/mg protein) and a 143.939% increase at Parmarkheri (16.3 ± 2.1 nmol/mg protein) compared to the reference site (6.16 ± 0.01 nmol/mg protein).

Gill: The gills were most affected, with an MDA level of 48.5 ± 3.8 nmol/mg protein at Juna Nagda, representing a 583.099% increase compared to Methwasa (7.3 ± 0.06 nmol/mg protein). At Parmarkheri, MDA levels remained high (47.6 ± 2.7 nmol/mg protein) with a percentage change of 570.423%.

These results highlight a significant increase in lipid peroxidation in all three tissues at both polluted sites, with the gills showing the highest susceptibility. The elevated MDA levels at Juna Nagda and Parmarkheri reflect enhanced oxidative stress caused by industrial and municipal wastewater discharges, indicating severe environmental impacts on fish health.

**Table 2** Changes in the lipid peroxidation in different tissues of Channa punctata exposed to wastewaters

| Tissues | Methwasa (Reference site) | Juna Nagda (Point Source) | % of change | Parmarkheri (Downstream) | % of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liver | 8.1 ± 0.01 | 39.3 ± 3.1 | 372.924% | 37.1 ± 2.2 | 346.45% |
| Kidney | 6.16 ± 0.01 | 18.6 ± 2.1 | 181.818% | 16.3 ± 2.1 | 143.939% |
| Gill | 7.3 ± 0.06 | 48.5 ± 3.8 | 583.099% | 47.6 ± 2.7 | 570.423% |

Reduced Glutathione (GSH): The levels of reduced glutathione (GSH), an important non-enzymatic antioxidant, were measured in the liver, kidney, and gills of *Channa punctata* from the reference site (Methwasa) and polluted sites (Juna Nagda and Parmarkheri).

- **Liver:** The liver GSH levels at the reference site were 212.3 ± 4.1 mmol/mg protein. At Juna Nagda, GSH levels decreased to 187.6 ± 4.8 mmol/mg protein, representing an 11.63% reduction. Conversely, at Parmarkheri,

GSH levels slightly increased to 217.3 ± 5.3 mmol/mg protein, showing a 2.35% rise compared to the reference site.

- **Kidney:** In the kidney, GSH levels at the reference site were 172.5 ± 3.9 mmol/mg protein. At Juna Nagda, levels rose to 194.3 ± 4.7 mmol/mg protein, reflecting a 12.17% increase. At Parmarkheri, GSH levels were slightly lower (187.8 ± 4.2 mmol/mg protein) than at Juna Nagda but still showed an 8.39% increase compared to the reference site.
- **Gill:** The gills exhibited GSH levels of 219.4 ± 4.8 mmol/mg protein at the reference site. These levels increased to 237.1 ± 5.8 mmol/mg protein at Juna Nagda, indicating a 9.21% rise. At Parmarkheri, GSH levels were 226.3 ± 5.1 mmol/mg protein, corresponding to a 4.23% increase compared to the reference site.

**Table 3** Reduced glutathione level (mmol/mg protein) in liver, kidney and gill of *Channa punctataa* exposed to upstream and downstream water

| Tissues | Methwasa (Reference site) | Juna Nagda (Point Source) | % of change | Parmarkheri (Downstream) | % of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liver | 212.3 ± 4.1 | 187.6 ± 4.8 | -11.63% | 217.3 ± 5.3 | 2.35% |
| Kidney | 172.5 ± 3.9 | 194.3 ± 4.7 | 12.17% | 187.8 ± 4.2 | 8.39% |
| Gill | 219.4 ± 4.8 | 237.1 ± 5.8 | 9.21% | 226.3 ± 5.1 | 4.23% |

The results suggest a complex antioxidant response. While the liver exhibited oxidative stress-induced depletion at Juna Nagda, the kidney and gills showed elevated GSH levels, possibly as a compensatory mechanism to counteract oxidative stress caused by wastewater exposure.

- **Catalase (CAT) activities**: The catalase (CAT) activity, which indicates enzymatic antioxidant defense, was assessed in the liver, kidney, and gills of *Channa punctata* from Methwasa (reference site), Juna Nagda (point source), and Parmarkheri (downstream).
- **Liver:** At the reference site, CAT activity was 18.4 ± 0.6 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein. This activity increased significantly at Juna Nagda to 47.6 ± 3.3 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, representing a 160.10% rise. At Parmarkheri, CAT activity was 26.8 ± 2.1 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, a 46.44% increase compared to the reference site.
- **Kidney:** The kidney exhibited CAT activity of 12.3 ± 0.9 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein at the reference site. At Juna Nagda, CAT activity rose sharply to 46.6 ± 4.1 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, indicating a 255.72% increase. At Parmarkheri, CAT activity was 24.2 ± 1.6 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, showing an 84.73% rise from the reference site.
- **Gill:** Gill tissues showed CAT activity of 15.6 ± 0.8 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein at the reference site. At Juna Nagda, CAT activity increased to 53.1 ± 4.4 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, marking a 247.05% rise. At Parmarkheri, CAT activity was 27.8 ± 1.8 mmol $H_2O_2$ consumed/min/mg protein, reflecting an 81.69% increase compared to the reference site.

The results highlight a significant elevation in CAT activity at Juna Nagda across all tissues, indicating an adaptive response to oxidative stress caused by high pollutant exposure. While CAT activity decreased downstream at Parmarkheri, it remained elevated compared to the reference site, reflecting continued oxidative stress exposure.

**Table 4** CAT activity (mmol H2O2 consumed/min/mg protein) in liver, kidney and gill of *Channa punctata* exposed to upstream and downstream water of Chambal River

| Tissues | Methwasa (Reference site) | Juna Nagda (Point Source) | % of change | Parmarkheri (Downstream) | % of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liver | 18.4 ± 0.6 | 47.6 ± 3.3 | 160.10% | 26.8 ± 2.1 | 46.44% |
| Kidney | 12.3 ± 0.9 | 46.6 ± 4.1 | 255.72% | 24.2 ± 1.6 | 84.73% |
| Gill | 15.6 ± 0.8 | 53.1 ± 4.4 | 247.05% | 27.8 ± 1.8 | 81.69% |

- **SOD activity:** The superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity, measured in the liver, kidney, and gills of *Channa punctata*, showed significant changes due to exposure at different sites.
- Liver: SOD activity at Methwasa (reference site) was 12.3 ± 1.1 Units/mg protein. It increased by 40.8% at Juna Nagda to 17.6 ± 1.8 Units/mg protein and by 14.4% at Parmarkheri to 14.3 ± 1.3 Units/mg protein.
- Kidney: The kidney exhibited an SOD activity of 11.2 ± 0.88 Units/mg protein at Methwasa. It rose by 27.96% at Juna Nagda to 15.1 ± 1.4 Units/mg protein and by 13.55% at Parmarkheri to 13.4 ± 1.2 Units/mg protein.
- Gill: Gill tissues showed an SOD activity of 12.4 ± 1.4 Units/mg protein at the reference site. It increased by 40.8% at Juna Nagda to 17.6 ± 1.8 Units/mg protein and by 14.4% at Parmarkheri to 14.3 ± 1.3 Units/mg protein.

Overall, SOD activity was highest at Juna Nagda, indicating an enhanced antioxidant response to oxidative stress from pollutants. Activity decreased downstream at Parmarkheri but remained elevated compared to the reference site, reflecting persistent oxidative stress exposure.

**Table 5** SOD activity (Units/mg Protein) in liver, kidney and gill of *Channa punctata* exposed to upstream and downstream water of Chambal River

| Tissues | Methwasa (Reference site) | Juna Nagda (Point Source) | % of change | Parmarkheri (Downstream) | % of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liver | 12.3 ± 1.1 | 17.6 ± 1.8 | 40.8% | 14.3 ± 1.3 | 14.4% |
| Kidney | 11.2 ± 0.88 | 15.1 ± 1.4 | 27.96% | 13.4 ± 1.2 | 13.55% |
| Gill | 12.4 ± 1.4 | 17.6 ± 1.8 | 40.8% | 14.3 ± 1.3 | 14.4% |

GST activity: The glutathione S-transferase (GST) activity in the liver, kidney, and gills of *Channa punctata* exhibited significant variations due to exposure to upstream and downstream waters of the Chambal River.

- **Liver:** At Methwasa (reference site), GST activity was 52.3 ± 2.1 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein. It increased by 26.82% at Juna Nagda (point source) to 67.6 ± 4.7 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein, and by 6.56% at Parmarkheri (downstream) to 56.8 ± 4.1 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein.
- **Kidney:** The kidney exhibited a GST activity of 49.3 ± 2.9 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein at Methwasa. It increased by 15.89% at Juna Nagda to 57.6 ± 4.4 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein and by 9.05% at Parmarkheri to 54.2 ± 4.6 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein.
- **Gill:** At the reference site, GST activity in the gills was 52.3 ± 3.1 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein. This increased by 19.32% at Juna Nagda to 63.6 ± 4.3 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein, and by 2.81% at Parmarkheri to 54.8 ± 4.2 nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein.

Overall, GST activity showed a marked increase at the point source site (Juna Nagda), indicating enhanced detoxification activity in response to pollutants. The activity remained relatively elevated downstream but showed a decrease in comparison to the point source, suggesting a partial recovery or reduced pollutant exposure.

**Table 6** GST activity (nmol CDNB conjugates/min/mg protein) in liver, kidney and gill of *Channa punctata* exposed to upstream and downstream water of Chambal River

| Tissues | Methwasa (Reference site) | Juna Nagda (Point Source) | % of change | Parmarkheri (Downstream) | % of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liver | 52.3 ± 2.1 | 67.6 ± 4.7 | 26.82% | 56.8 ± 4.1 | 6.56% |
| Kidney | 49.3 ± 2.9 | 57.6 ± 4.4 | 15.89% | 54.2 ± 4.6 | 9.05% |
| Gill | 52.3 ± 3.1 | 63.6 ± 4.3 | 19.32% | 54.8 ± 4.2 | 2.81% |

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Water Quality

The physicochemical analysis of the Chambal River water revealed substantial pollution at the point-source (Juna Nagda) and downstream (Parmarkheri) sites compared to the reference site (Methwasa). At Juna Nagda, water quality parameters such as electrical conductivity (EC), total alkalinity, nitrate, chloride, phosphate, and sulfate were notably higher than the reference site, indicating contamination due to industrial and municipal waste discharges. The elevated levels of these pollutants suggest nutrient loading and possible toxicity, which could be contributing to the observed stress in fish tissues. Particularly, the high levels of phosphate and sulfate are concerning as they are commonly associated with eutrophication and heavy metal toxicity (Gupta et al., 2013). In contrast, water quality at Parmarkheri was slightly better but still reflected the downstream impact of wastewater discharge.

### 4.2. Histopathology

Histopathological analysis of liver, kidney, and gill tissues of *Channa punctata* revealed significant morphological changes at the point-source and downstream sites. At Juna Nagda, the liver exhibited advanced damage, including blood vessel congestion, nuclear degeneration, and cytoplasmic degeneration, which are indicative of metabolic disruption and tissue hypoxia due to high pollutant levels (Shao et al., 2019). Similar damage was observed in the kidneys, with dilation of glomerular capillaries and tubular degeneration, reflecting renal stress from toxicants. Gill tissues also showed hypertrophy, hemorrhage, and lamellar disorganization, which are hallmark signs of respiratory stress due to poor water quality (Basha et al., 2012). These findings are consistent with earlier studies, which have shown that exposure to polluted water can cause severe histological changes in fish organs (Kumari et al., 2020).

### 4.3. Oxidative Stress Biomarkers

Oxidative stress markers, including lipid peroxidation (LPO), superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), and reduced glutathione (GSH) levels, were significantly altered in fish exposed to contaminated water. At Juna Nagda, LPO levels were drastically elevated in all tissues, reflecting an increase in oxidative damage due to pollutant-induced stress (Rao et al., 2015). The significant increase in LPO in the liver (372.92%), kidney (181.82%), and gills (583.1%) suggests that oxidative damage was most pronounced at the point-source site. This was further confirmed by reduced GSH levels and altered SOD and CAT activities, which are indicative of the fish's compromised antioxidant defense system (Yuan et al., 2014). The elevation in SOD and CAT activities in response to increased oxidative stress suggests that *Channa punctata* attempted to counteract the oxidative damage, though the recovery was insufficient to prevent histopathological changes.

At Parmarkheri, although oxidative stress markers were still elevated compared to the reference site, they showed partial recovery compared to the point source. The lower levels of oxidative damage and the more moderate increases in enzyme activities in downstream tissues suggest a dilution effect or reduced exposure to pollutants further downstream. However, even at the downstream site, the histopathological alterations, particularly in the gills and kidneys, point to the lasting impact of pollution from the upstream source.

The combined findings of the histopathological alterations and the elevated oxidative stress biomarkers provide strong evidence of pollution-induced toxicity in *Channa punctata*. The high levels of pollutants at Juna Nagda, reflected in the water quality analysis, correlate with the severe tissue damage observed in the fish. The marked increase in oxidative stress markers and histopathological lesions indicates that pollutants in the water—likely a combination of organic and inorganic contaminants—induced both acute and chronic stress responses in the fish. These stress responses were particularly evident in the liver, kidney, and gills, which are key organs involved in metabolism, excretion, and respiration, respectively.

The partial recovery observed in downstream tissues suggests that while some pollutants may be diluted, their cumulative effects still pose a threat to aquatic life. This supports the need for effective wastewater management and pollution control measures in the Chambal River, particularly at the point-source site. Furthermore, the significant alterations in oxidative stress biomarkers, even in the downstream site, underscore the long-lasting impact of pollution on aquatic organisms (Saravanan et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study underscore the importance of water quality management to protect aquatic ecosystems. The integration of histopathological and oxidative stress biomarker analyses with water quality data provides a comprehensive approach to assessing the environmental health of aquatic ecosystems affected by pollution. These findings emphasize the need for stringent regulations on industrial and municipal discharges and suggest that continued monitoring is essential to mitigate the impacts of pollution on biodiversity

## Compliance with ethical standards

*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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