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The Aravalli Definition Dispute — Geographic Washing

15 January 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT

GEOGRAPHY

POLITY

GS1

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The Aravalli Definition Dispute — Geographic Washing



Down to Earth

Chapter 3 · 2 min read

WHY IN NEWS

The Supreme Court stayed its November 2025 order which defined the Aravallis strictly as landforms with a minimum elevation of 100 metres above local relief.

The Disputed Definition

- SC had accepted: minimum **100m elevation** above local relief; range requires 2+ hills within 500m
- **Origin:** MoEFCC committee adopted Richard Murphy's **1968 academic landform classification** to draft a Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM)
- This deliberately ignored the **Forest Survey of India (FSI) standard** of >3-degree slope

Why This Definition is Dangerous

Legal Exclusion:

- Only **1,048 of 12,081 hills** in Rajasthan are above 100m (**9%**)
- Over **90% of terrain** — degraded forests, scrublands, *gair mumkin pahar* (uncultivable hills) — would lose legal protection
- Haryana forest cover (**3.6%**) would further shrink
- 2018 CEC report: **25% of Rajasthan Aravallis lost** to illegal mining since 1967-68
- Forest cover loss: **5,772.7 sq km (32% reduction)**

Geological Hazards:

- Heavy mining alters **Crustal Reflectivity Variation (CRV)** — dictates how seismic waves travel
- Deep excavations can trigger **Reservoir-Induced Seismicity** or amplify shockwaves from distant Hindu Kush earthquakes, endangering **Delhi-NCR**

Hydrological Crisis:

- Fractured rocks of lower ridges are critical **recharge zones** for Rajasthan's groundwater "dark zones"
- Destruction guarantees desertification

Mining Interests

- MoEFCC identified **critical minerals** (lithium, nickel, graphite, REEs) in Aravalli-Delhi belt
- Recommended limited mining for “strategic and atomic minerals”
- **Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act 2023 loophole:** Allows diversion of ecologically sensitive forests for mining if **3 parts degraded land exchanged for 1 part lush forest** — facilitates destruction under guise of energy transition

Ecological Significance

- Aravallis act as **barrier against Thar Desert eastward expansion** through 12 identified sand gaps
- Critical stopover for migratory birds (Common Cuckoo uses Jhalana as energy replenishment point)
- Supports unique desert-adapted fauna: royal snake, desert monitor lizard, Asiatic wildcat, white-footed fox

Way Forward

- Treat Aravallis as an **indivisible 10,000 sq km ecological mosaic** — not isolated peaks
- SC must enforce earlier rulings (*Ashok Sharma case*) mandating identification, demarcation, and **GIS-mapping** of all forests, wildlife corridors, and eco-sensitive zones *before* any mining policy

UPSC Angle

- **GS1:** Physical geography (Aravalli fold belt, geomorphology, seismicity)
- **GS2:** Judiciary, environmental governance, Centre-State conflict
- **GS3:** Environment, mining vs conservation, critical minerals policy



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