
REDEFINING THE ARAVALLIS: ASSESSING THE SUPREME COURTS 2025 UNIFORM 100-METRE RELIEF STANDARD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MINING AND CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

In December 2025, in an effort to formalize similar habitat features across different states in India, the Supreme Court settled on a nationwide geomorphological definition for what constitutes "Aravalli hills," defining these geographical formations as those rising at least 100m from surrounding topography. While this decision constitutes an important response to functional ambiguities associated with Aravalli-range designation—a vital habitat for protecting North India from desertification, depletion of groundwater resources, and biodiversity depletion—its impact may have already created new controversies about potential over-reaching in extinguishing habitat rights for low-relief ridges or hill formations well under 100m. On these latter points, while there is likely added value for enhanced objective definition and improved clarity for habitat conservation in North India, this decision may well escalate concerns about ongoing hazards from habitat fragmentation, habitat degradation, and habitat impact resulting from an aggressively expanding list of human activities. This paper examines the ecological, jurisprudential, and socio-economic facts underlying this legislation in reaching determinations about its potential habitat for North India.

Introduction

In December 2025, the Supreme Court of India made a scientific definition for the Aravalli hills, which includes any landform situated in the Aravalli districts and measuring at least 100 meters above the local relief. This came after years of ambiguity on whether the Aravalli range, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world and a natural shield for North India, should qualify as a “hill” under the legal definition. This development has raised debate on whether this definition could have the reverse effect of diminishing environmental protection. This paper will examine the importance and context of the definition given to the Aravalli hills and the implications associated with the challenges to environmental governance.¹

Ecological and Socio-Economic Significance of the Aravallis

Extending over a distance of 700 kilometres in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi, the Aravalli Ranges present a significant natural barrier separating the Thar Desert from the fertile region of North India. In terms of its ecological aspects, the region features a wide diversity of flora and fauna, such as dry deciduous forest types, as well as wildlife corridors, which in turn help to stabilize broken habitats. The Aravalli Ranges also present a significant groundwater recharge system in areas that rely on the aquifer system for farming irrigation as well as domestic use. A natural barrier against desert dust, it holds back the advancement of aridity in the National Capitol Region.

The Aravalli range is ecologically and socioeconomically vital for the surrounding areas as it is a source of livelihood for them. Additionally, it is a site of stone, marble, and other minerals; hence, it is a major site for stone quarrying. It is at the junction of these two sources of livelihood that the Aravalli region finds itself, due to its strategic position and the environmental imperative to conserve it compared to other sites.²

History of Mining and Legal Disputes

In the Aravallis, the mining activity was so uncontrolled and often illegal. Since the end of the

¹<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/aravalli-100-metre-rule-explained-what-it-is-why-it-matters/articleshow/126137331.cms>

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/apex-court-takes-suo-motu-cognizance-in-aravalli-uniform-definition-case-94724>

²https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-great-wall-in-the-north-why-the-aravallis-matter-10437728/?utm_

1990s and up to the present time, 31 out of the total 128 Aravallis have gone missing in the last 50 years because of illegal mining in the area. Moreover, 10-12 major holes have resulted in the destruction of the Aravali range because of deforestation and loss of biodiversity. through a series of landmark orders restricting quarrying in consigned forest and hill areas. However, implementation remained uneven.

Issues like the lack of a standard definition of what constituted the "hill" or "Aravalli area" also remained a challenge. States used varying definitions or map standards to determine what constituted the restricted or permissible areas. There were thus conflicts over the application of the restricted or permissible zones to particular areas. Court decision 2025 needs to be appreciated within the assessment of the above uncertainties and controversial drivers.³

The 2025 Supreme Court Ruling: The 100-Metre Relief Definition

In 2025, the Supreme Court approved a uniform criterion defining a hill as any landform summit that rises at least 100 metres above the surrounding ground level. This "relief" measurement is rooted in geomorphological classification tools internationally used to differentiate hills from lower-lying ridges or elevations. Applying this standard, the Court directed that Aravalli mapping must identify only those formations meeting the threshold and treat them as protected hills.

Importantly, the ruling did not immediately liberalise mining. The court instead directed that no new mining leases will be granted in the Aravalli region until a Management Plan for Sustainable Mining is prepared for the entire landscape by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education. The Court and the Union government later clarified that the ruling sought consistency and objectivity, not relaxation of environmental restrictions.⁴

Claimed Benefits: Legal Clarity and Mining Regulation

The proponents of the judgment thus believe that the scientifically cemented and uniform definition has strengthened the legal clarity given by the Court. Disputes over classification have long delayed regulatory enforcement and economic decision-making. A uniform measurable benchmark reduces administrative discretion, thereby subsidizing compliance and

³<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/why-aravali-watchers-look-at-scs-100m-mining-definition-with-concern/articleshow/125549206.cms>

⁴<https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2025/dec/doc20251221740901.pdf>

judicial review.

The government further argues that most areas of ecological fragility will remain out of bounds and that the new norm will ease the preparation of accurate land records and mining inventories. Governance-wise, the judgment conforms to a trend towards rule-based environmental regulation, seeking to replace ad hoc determinations with standardised criteria.⁵

Environmental and Governance Concerns Raised by Critics

However, the judgment has also attracted widespread criticism from researchers and citizen groups. The first reaction to the judgment is that the 100m relief criteria may not take into account the fact that many small hillocks, topographic ridges, or rock outcrops can work equally well in relation to the ecological functions. In fact, many areas of the Aravallis in Haryana and Delhi are characterized by low-relief topography. These areas represent the remains of a once continuous chain of topographic features.

According to scholars, nature does not function in an absolute manner based on random boundaries. Even when land forms are moderately adequate, they are capable of supporting biodiversity corridors, especially in areas that have previously been fragmented. The exclusion of wetlands from its definition poses high possibilities of downgrading by laws and further re-categorization as suitable areas for construction or mining.

The decision has also triggered public mobilizations, such as protests and campaigns like the ‘Save Aravalli’ campaign, demanding more legal security. Citizens’ organizations emphasize that they should be guided by preventive tenets instead of the principle of optimisation, especially in areas that face stresses of groundwater availability and climate change risk.^{6 7 8}

Implementation and Enforcement Challenges

Beyond such definitional issues, meanwhile, there are still considerable challenges with respect

⁵<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/centre-rejects-mining-push-charge-behind-aravalli-definition-asserts-no-relaxation-9860742>

⁶<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/save-aravalli-campaign-floods-x-why-has-the-supreme-courts-ruling-on-aravallis-mountain-range-triggered-an-alarm/articleshow/126088733.cms>

⁷https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/jnu-students-march-against-new-aravali-definition-call-for-strong-legal-safeguards/articleshow/126208486.cms?utm_

⁸<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/environment/apex-court-takes-suo-motu-cognizance-in-aravalli-uniform-definition-case-94724>

to implementation. Technical expertise and high-quality data are needed for accurate relief mapping across a large area, and disputes may occur with regard to base relief measurements, relief scale, and whether human-altered landscapes should be included. All this would be included. Besides, existing gaps in environmental monitoring to date would be issues like a shortage of staff and a lack of coordination between state and central agencies, which would pose enforcement difficulties.

Another challenge is the possible capture of policies. Mining interests could try to influence the mapping and zoning determinations in ways that benefit lease approvals. In the absence of strong institutional safeguards, even scientifically sound standards threaten to be applied inconsistently.

Balancing Development and Conservation: A Way Forward

The issue of 2025 is significant to the Indian environmental governance structure as it presents a dilemma on how to maintain sensitive ecosystems and support economic development. In the effort to ensure that areas of significant biotic or hydrological significance are also safeguarded if they fall below the relief classification level, there would need to be a harmonization of sensitive areas and geomorphological definitions.

Second, cumulative impact assessments and not project-level assessments should inform decision-making. Economic activities will have to be balanced against sustainability costs since the Aravallis help recharge groundwater and reduce climate change.

Third, community participation and transparency in the mapping and monitoring processes can help to instil confidence and mitigate the risk of regulatory degradation. Finally, in addition to legal safeguards, restoration programs for the degraded Aravalli areas, for example, reforestation, conservation of the watershed, and reconnecting the ecological corridors, need to be pursued.

Conclusion

The relief standard of 100 metres, as enunciated by the Supreme Court, is crucial for bringing about legal clarity to the governance of the Aravalli hills. While the uniform definition reduces ambiguity and advances the cause of regulatory efficiency, it also raises genuine concerns pertaining to the potential exclusion of ecologically valuable landforms of low relief. In the

final analysis, the outcomes of the judgment will depend not just on the technical accuracy of mapping but on whether ecological science, climate resilience, and participatory governance are internalised into the broader regulatory regime. Saving the Aravallis is an issue not of mere definition but of securing environmental stability for North India for generations to come.

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