

## **The Curse of Aravalli**

As winter sets in over Delhi, talk inside government offices is dominated by security, self-reliance, and national interest. Far from these debates, the Aravalli Hills among the oldest mountain ranges in the world are once again caught in the middle of a policy struggle that raises a larger question: how far should strategic needs be allowed to override environmental protection?

On December 23, Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff, highlighted a real concern. Modern defence systems depend on critical minerals, many of which India imports. With global supply chains under stress and geopolitics shaping access, dependence on foreign sources has become a security risk. The National Critical Mineral Mission, he argued, is vital for defence preparedness.

But these remarks came at a sensitive moment. The Aravalli, already under severe ecological strain, are being discussed as potential sites for mining in the name of strategy. The Aravalli range is not just an ancient geological formation. It plays a crucial role in protecting northern India's environment.

It slows the spread of the Thar Desert, helps recharge groundwater, improves air quality, and supports forests and wildlife across Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, and Gujarat. The Supreme Court has repeatedly recognised these functions, linking the health of the Aravalli to water security and climate stability.

Yet decades of illegal mining, rapid urbanisation, deforestation, and falling water tables have left the region badly damaged. The debate intensified on November 20, when the Supreme Court attempted to settle long-standing confusion by adopting a standard definition of the Aravalli Hills.

Under this definition, landforms rising at least 100 metres above the surrounding terrain in notified districts would qualify as Aravalli Hills, while clusters within 500 metres would be treated as a range. The Court halted new mining leases and banned mining in core and ecologically sensitive areas. However, it allowed an exception for minerals considered critical for strategic or atomic purposes.

Environmental groups immediately raised concerns. They argued that breaking a continuous ecological system into technical measurements risks leaving out

valleys, forests, and wildlife corridors that are essential to the Aravalli survival. Acknowledging these concerns, the Court has since paused the definition and decided to form a new committee to review the issue.

The Aravalli case highlights a larger problem in India's environmental governance. There is no clear, transparent system to resolve conflicts between environmental protection and defence or industrial demands. Instead, decisions are often made through executive orders, exemptions, or special approvals, with "national security" used to limit scrutiny.

Environmental laws already allow certain projects to bypass public consultation if they are declared strategic. Combined with weaker impact assessments and the increasing use of post-facto clearances, this has made the meaning of "national interest" dangerously vague.

Recent policy changes have also made it easier to build roads, conduct exploratory drilling, and install infrastructure in forested areas, often before full environmental studies are completed. While mining is not openly exempt, the trend is clear.

The Aravalli region contains minerals that are attractive for both industry and defence, including base metals, tungsten, and possibly lithium and rare-earth elements needed for clean energy technologies. This overlap between ecological fragility and mineral wealth makes the region especially vulnerable.

The Supreme Court has warned that mining without proper groundwater studies and cumulative impact assessments could cause permanent damage. It has directed the Environment Ministry to prepare a comprehensive, range-wide plan for sustainable mining before granting any new leases.

The issue is not whether India needs critical minerals it does. The real question is how these needs are balanced against environmental limits and public accountability. If strategic concerns are to override environmental safeguards, the reasons must be clear and transparent.

Authorities must explain why alternatives such as imports, recycling, or sourcing from less sensitive areas are not viable. Data and impact assessments should be accessible to the public. Without such clarity, India risks repeating a familiar pattern: development and climate goals colliding through ad hoc decisions, while environmental protections steadily weaken.

For the Aravalli, the time is ticking. Older than the Himalayas, they have survived centuries of natural change. Whether they survive modern policy choices will depend on decisions being made now far from the hills, but with consequences that will be felt for generations.

