

The Unmaking of a Mountain: How Legal Loopholes Are Erasing the Aravallis

An investigative briefing on the **systematic dismantling of environmental protections** in India's oldest mountain range.



December 2025: Citizens take to the streets in a silent protest to save the Aravallis

- On December 21, 2025, over 150 residents from Gurugram and the NCR, organized by the Aravalli Bachao Citizens Movement, held a silent march to protest the “destruction of the Aravalli range.”
- The protest was a direct response to a recent Supreme Court ruling that protesters argue leaves the ecosystem vulnerable to mining, construction, and development.
- Placards highlighted the ecological, climatic, and social importance of the mountain range.

“We will not allow the government, bureaucrats, politicians or even the judiciary to open up the sacred Aravallis for destruction.”

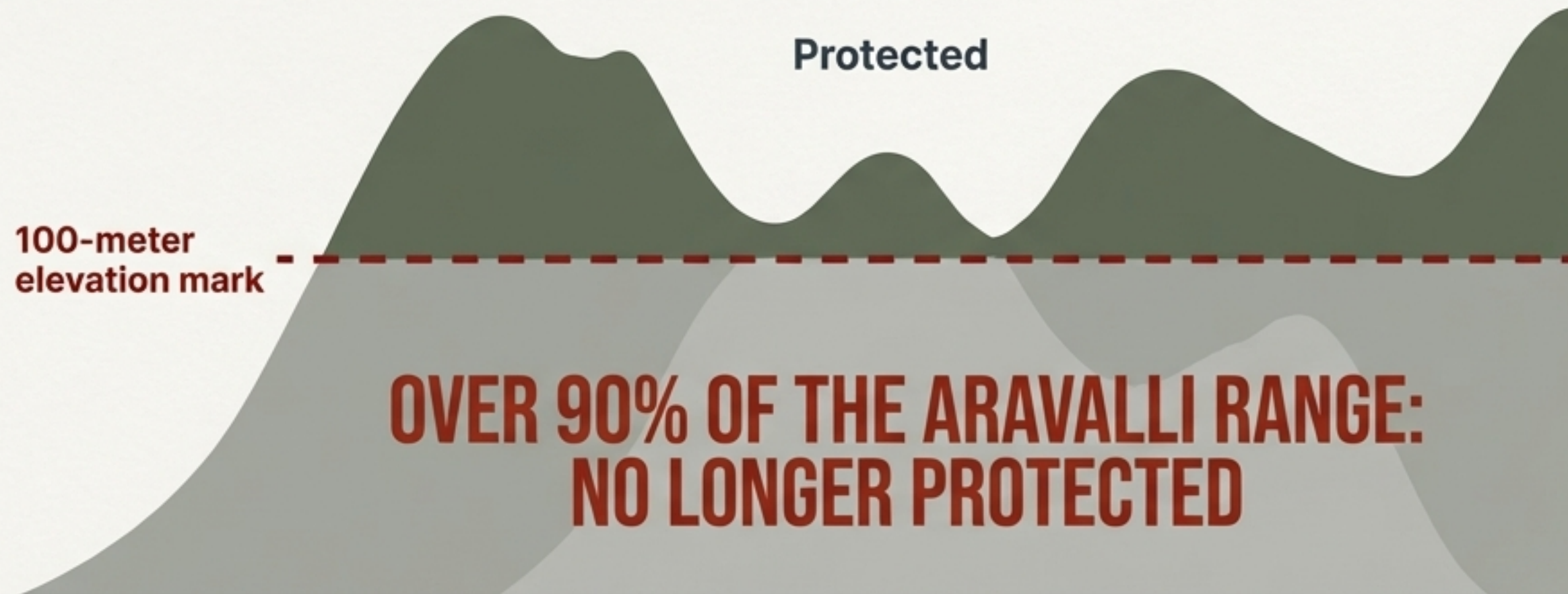
— Vaishali Rana, Trustee, Aravalli Bachao



The trigger for the protests: A new definition that could wipe 90% of the Aravallis off the map.

On November 20, 2025, the Supreme Court accepted a new “uniform definition” for the Aravalli Hills.

The New Definition: “Any landform... having an elevation of 100 metres or more from the local relief”.



Defining the Aravallis only by a height of 100 metres is deeply flawed and ignores the ecological reality of this ancient mountain range. The forests, aquifers and biodiversity do not begin or end at an arbitrary elevation.”

— Vaishali Rana, Trustee, Aravalli Bachao

Simultaneously, Haryana redefines 'forest' with criteria that its own ecosystem cannot meet.

The New Definition

Haryana's New Definition (August 18, 2025)



Size: Minimum 5 hectares (if isolated) or 2 hectares (if adjoining a notified forest).



Canopy Density: 0.4 (40%) or higher.

Expert Analysis: "Setting 0.4 canopy density (40%) as the marker for a forest in Haryana is unrealistic and would exclude most forests in Haryana." - Dr. R P Balwan, Retd. Forest Officer

The Problem & Impact

The Problem

- Environmentalists call the definition a "joke with no ecological or scientific basis" for a semi-arid state where the natural forest is scrubby and dry.
- Haryana has the lowest forest cover in India (**3.6%**). Over 60% of its Recorded Forest Area is "open forest" (10-40% canopy), which would not meet this new definition.

Impact Stat: The new definition is projected to exclude **75-80%** of the potential "deemed forest" in the Aravallis from protection.

The legal foundation for this erosion of protection: The **Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023**.

BEFORE

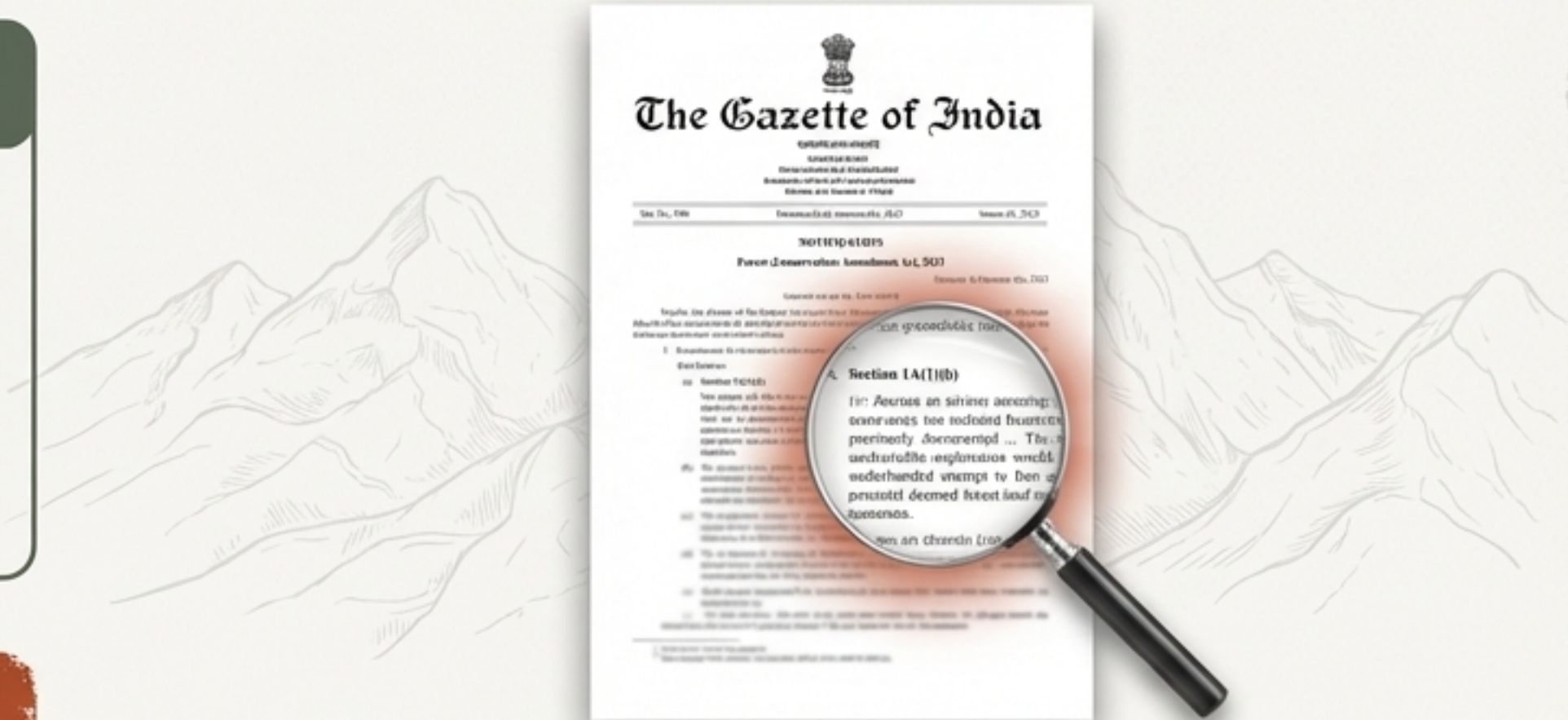
The Law: The Act applied to all land that fit the 'dictionary meaning' of a forest, regardless of official records (as per the 1996 Godavarman judgment).

The Result: This created the protective category of '**deemed forests**'.

AFTER

The Law: The Act now only applies to land that was officially declared or recorded as 'forest' in government records on or after October 25, 1980.

The Result: This effectively **eliminates** the entire 'deemed forest' category.



Quote: "...there was no third category of 'deemed' or dictionary meaning,' which would have included forests not previously documented... The uncharitable explanation would be that this is a kind of an underhanded attempt to free up potential deemed forest land for commercial use." – **Chetan Agarwal, Forest Analyst.**

1996: The Supreme Court created a powerful protective shield for India's forests.

The Landmark Case: *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India & Others.*

The Historic Judgment (Dec 12, 1996):

- The Supreme Court ruled that the term 'forest' must be understood according to its simple **dictionary meaning**.
- This protection applied to **any area recorded as forest in government records, irrespective of ownership**.
- Crucially, it created the concept of '**deemed forests**': areas that are forests in reality, even if not officially notified.

The Mandate:

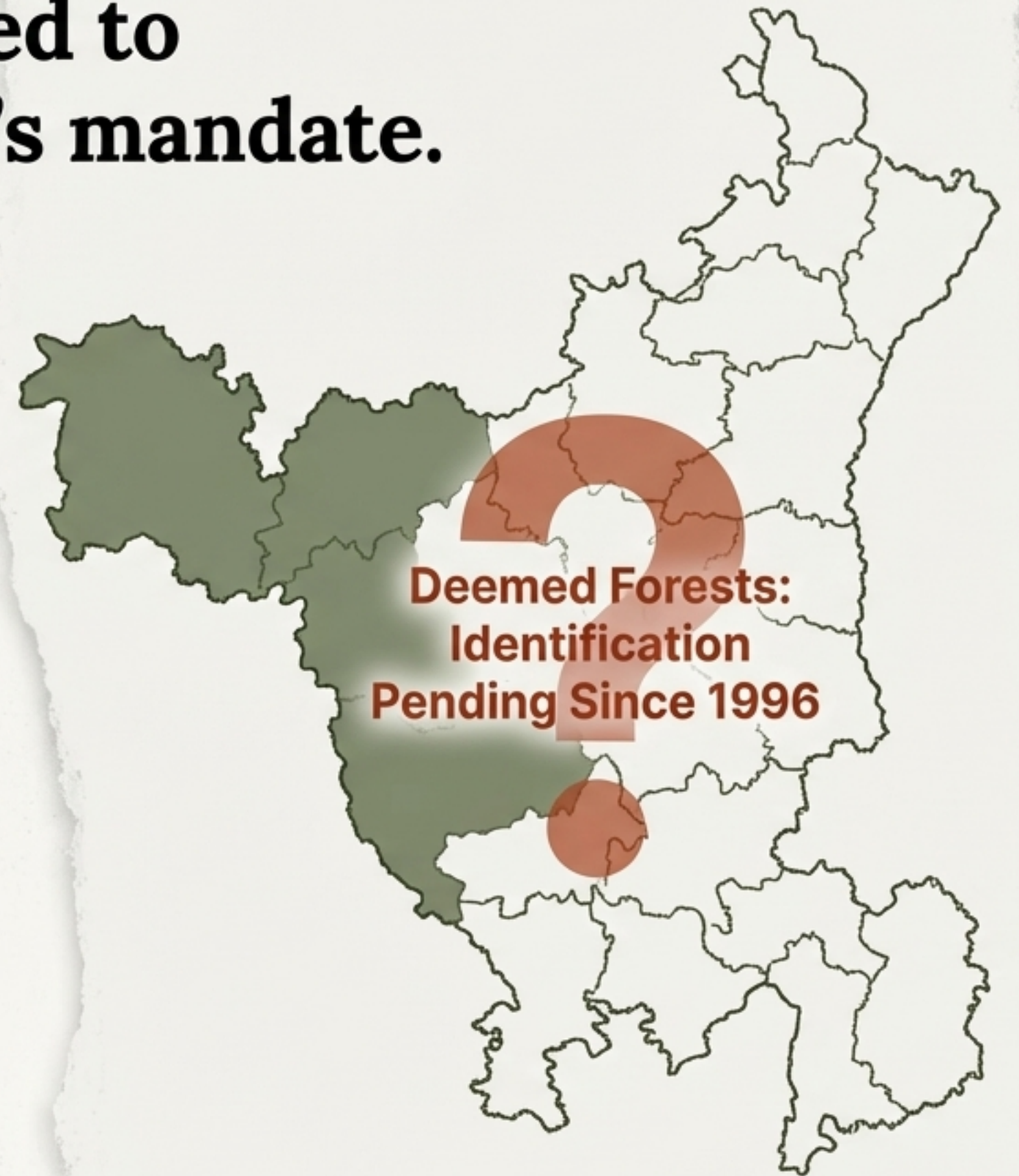
The Court directed all state governments to form expert committees to identify these 'deemed forests' and bring them under the protection of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. This ruling was the cornerstone of forest protection in India for nearly 30 years.

For over 25 years, Haryana failed to implement the Supreme Court's mandate.

A Critical Omission: Despite the clear 1996 Supreme Court directive, the Haryana government never officially identified or notified its 'deemed forests'.

Consequence: This inaction left thousands of acres of ecologically vital Aravalli forest land in a state of legal limbo, without the formal protection they were entitled to. Even Mangar Bani, a dense sacred grove, was left awaiting a 'deemed forest' tag.

Haryana has a forest area of only **3.63%** of its total geographical area.



Case Study: Mangar Bani, a sacred grove at the heart of the conflict

- Mangar Bani is one of the last remaining patches of primary forest in the entire region, a biodiversity-rich sacred grove.
- The area is characterized as *gair mumkin pahar* (uncultivable hill) in revenue records.
- Total Mangar village area: 4,262 acres, of which 3,810 acres is hill area.
- While the Haryana government declared Mangar Bani a 'no-construction zone' in 2016, it crucially **did not notify the sacred grove as a 'forest,'** leaving it vulnerable.

The Central Issue:

A large part of the land that should have been identified as 'deemed forest' under the 1996 Godavarman ruling is, in fact, privately owned. The 2023 FCA amendment now removes protection from these very lands.

Following the money: The corporate interests who own Mangar's "deemed forests."

Investigations of land records reveal that nearly **1,000 acres** of Mangar's forest-like area is owned by three primary companies and their subsidiaries:

Ireo Private Limited

(and its subsidiary Massive Infracon, which owned ~400 acres)

Response:

Declined to comment.

M3M India Private Limited

(and its indicated subsidiary Kenwood Mercantile, which owns large parcels)

Response:

Declined to comment.

Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust

Owns significant land parcels in the area.

Response:

A representative stated the amendment is "development oriented and not destruction oriented."

Evidence: This information is based on analysis of 2018-19 *jamabandi* (land records), company communications with the Town and Country Planning department, and environmental clearance forms.

The Troubled History: How Mangar's common lands were privatized and sold to developers.

Original Status

The Aravalli land in Mangar was originally *shamlat deh* (common village land) belonging to the community.

The Transfer

(~1973-74)

A local court order in Ballabgarh was used to mutate ~3,810 acres from panchayat (community) ownership back to village proprietors. This **fraudulent** privatization was the starting point for land sales.

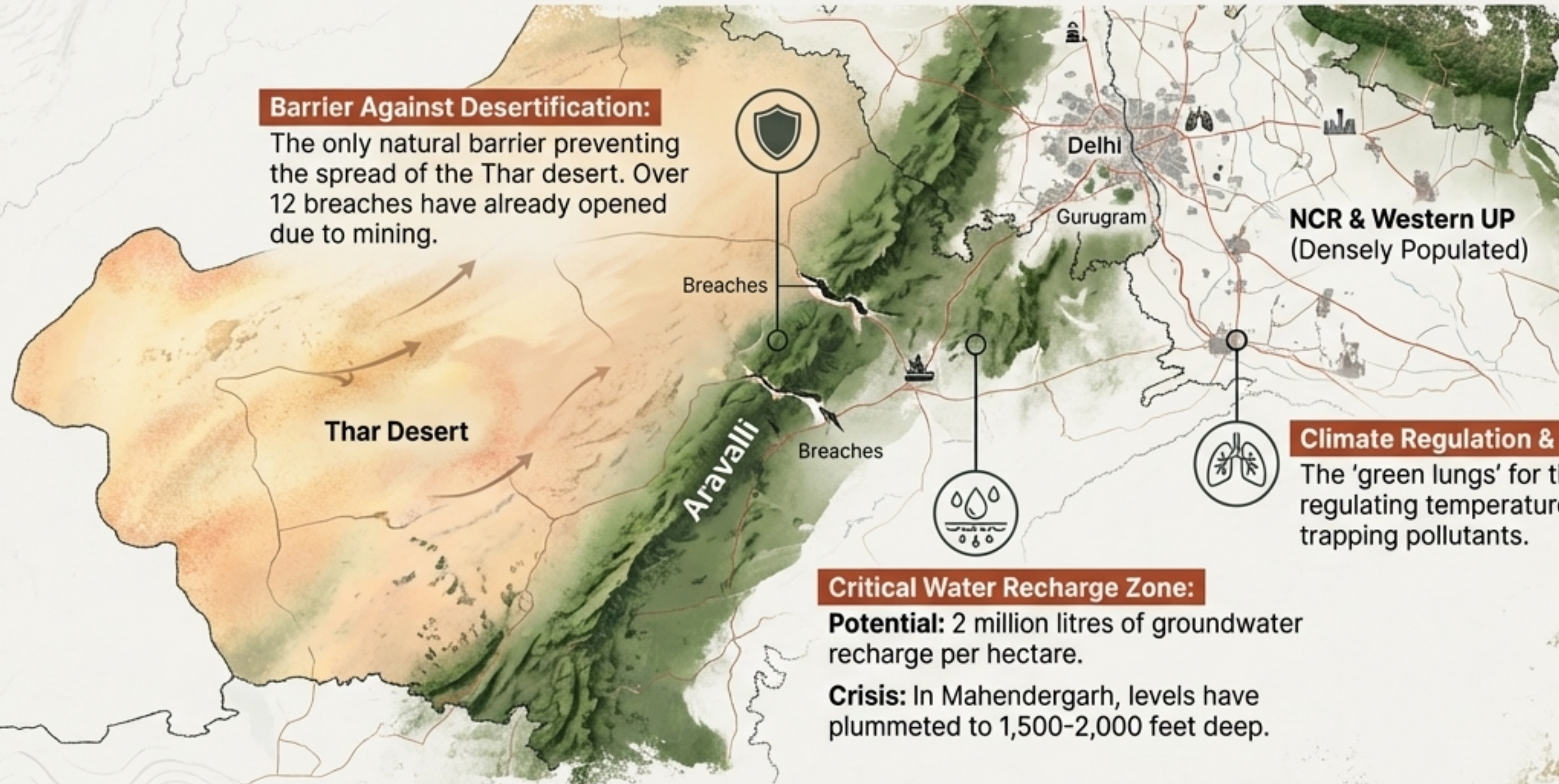
(~1985-86)

Consolidation proceedings were then 'misused' to partition the common land into individual plots for the new owners, facilitating sales to developers.

"Some villagers from Mangar moved the local court to get a judgement in their favour to privatise the common land. That was the beginning of how land started to be sold to private developers in Mangar."

- **Chetan Agarwal, Forest Analyst**

The Stakes: Why the Aravallis are the irreplaceable ecological lifeline for North-West India.



A living mountain range: The Aravallis are a critical wildlife corridor and biodiversity hotspot.

Rich Fauna

The remnant forests act as a crucial habitat and corridor for a wide range of native wildlife, including endangered mammals:

- Leopards
- Grey Langurs
- Hyenas
- Jackals
- Honey Badgers
- Jungle Cats

Avian Diversity

The region is home to over 200 species of birds.

The Threat

As the hills are razed and forests are fragmented for mining and real estate, wildlife habitats shrink, leading to a direct increase in human-wildlife conflict in the surrounding regions.



The human cost: Mining's legacy of ecological ruin and social disruption

Economic Impact

Closure of mines led to unemployment and income instability for local communities.

In 2002, **38.8%** of people in Aravalli hills were in mining; now they are mostly laborers.

The Current Reality

Licensed mining has already wiped out ecological heritage in districts like Charkhi Dadri and Bhiwani. Illegal mining continues brazenly in other areas. Dust from stone crushers covers crops, impacting agricultural productivity.

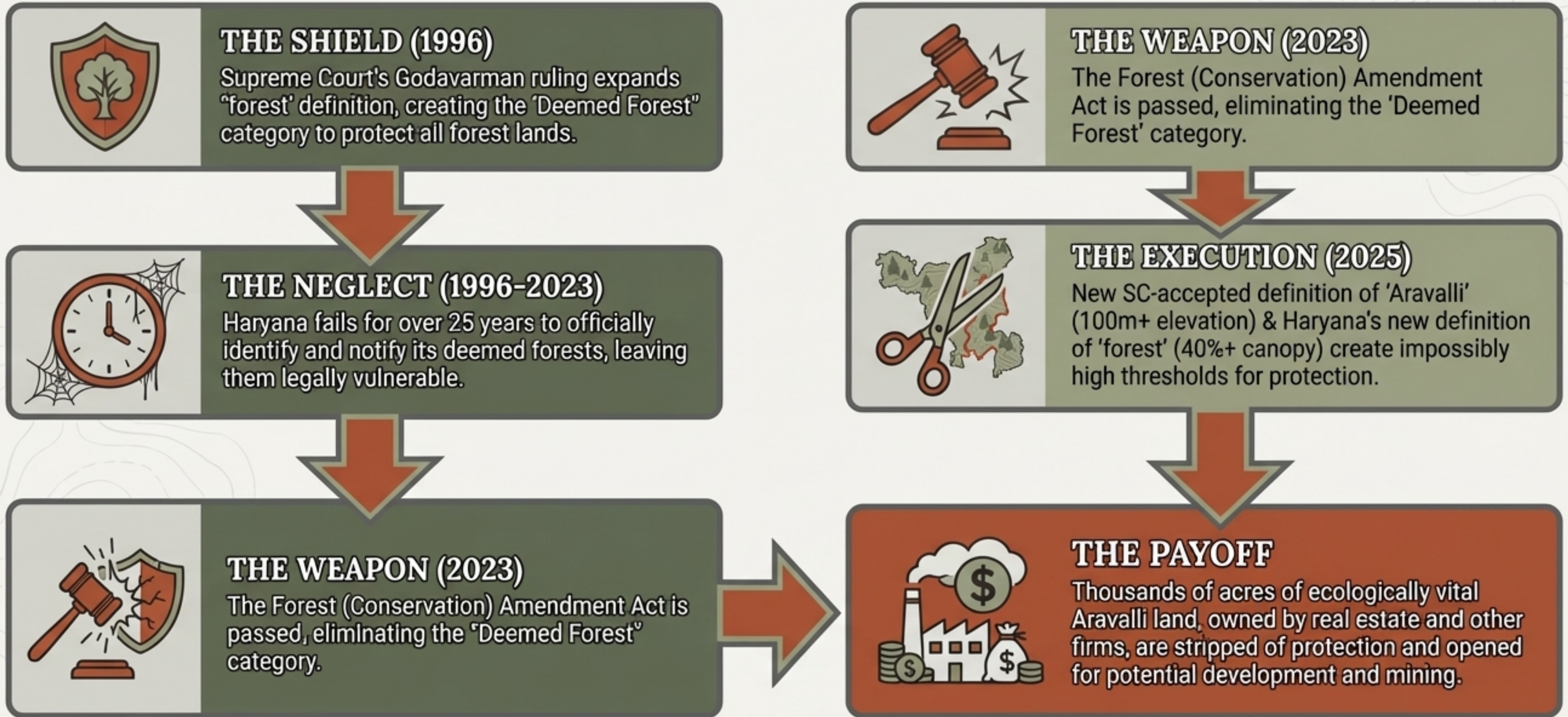
Health Impact

During mining, dust pollution was rampant. After closure, respiratory diseases dropped significantly (from **37.8%** to **13.2%**).

However, problems from poor water quality (stagnant in abandoned pits) have increased.



A clear pattern emerges: A step-by-step dismantling of environmental law for private gain.



The result is not an accident, but an ecological disaster by design.

The systematic removal of three decades of legal jurisprudence protecting the Aravallis is creating irreversible gaps in a shield that protects the water security, air quality, and climate of over 50 million people. The choice to redefine a mountain range and its forests out of existence threatens to turn North-West India's ecological lifeline into a real estate opportunity.



"Excluding hills below 100 metres in the Aravallis would be an ecological disaster for the entire NCR, creating even more gaps in the Aravalli shield, further increasing the particulate matter in the air leading to a cascading effect on pollution and desertification."

- M.D. Sinha & Chetan Agarwal, The Indian Express.