Amendments to Punjab Land Preservation Act

Why in news?

The Supreme Court has ordered the Haryana government to not implement the amendments it made to the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA).

What is the PLP Act?

- All non-forest activities in and along the Aravali hills have, for long, been prohibited, to preserve the ecology of these mountains.
- The British had enacted a special law, the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA), for this purpose way back in 1900.
- PLPA has now been diluted by the Haryana government.
- The amendments took away the forest status of large chunks of these hills and threw open them for commercial activities.
- These are areas under master plans of cities such as Gurugram, Faridabad, Nuh, Mahendragarh and Rewari.
- The move would take away the protection offered to them under the PLP Act.

How significant are the Aravallis?

- The Aravallis is one of the world's oldest mountain chains, and its ecological worth is immense.
- The 692-km Aravali range spans parts of Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

- The Aravallis serve as the lungs for the highly polluted National Capital Region (NCR).
- It hinders the dust-laden winds from Rajasthan to enter the NCR where the air quality is already fatally poor.
- It also plays a critical role in recharging the groundwater of the region around it.
- The mountains also act as a natural shield against the spread of the Thar Desert.
- Moreover, it is the source of origin of several rivers and rivulets, including Sabarmati, Luni, Chambal and Krishnavati.

- Besides, it is the catchment of lakes like Damdama, Dhauj, Badkhal and Surajkund.
- More importantly, it harbours rich biodiversity, hosting numerous species of plants, birds and animals.
- It is the corridor between Asola Bhatti sanctuary in Delhi and Sariska in Rajasthan for leopards, hyenas, jackals, mongoose and most other animals.



What are the concerns in the use?

- Large scale illegal encroachments and misuse of the Aravali forests for realty, mining and other commercial purposes are going on since the 1970s.
- The urbanisation has gradually encroached agricultural and forest lands as newer living and working spaces were developed.
- Lakhs of dwelling units, commercial buildings and industries have already come up in this fragile mountainous track.
- Around 30% of the Aravali area falling in the Faridabad and Gurugram districts which are notified as protected forests under the PLPA now stands privatised.
- The Haryana portion of the Aravali range remains the country’s most degraded forest, as per a Wildlife Institute of India study.
- The rapid and unabated deforestation and development activities are further damaging this unique landscape.
- As many as 31 out of the 128 hills in the Rajasthan portion of the Aravallis have totally disappeared, flattened by the land and mining mafias.

What lies ahead?

- The obvious motive behind the amendment of the statute is to legitimise the illegal encroachments and misuse of the Aravalli forests.
- Haryana has the lowest forest cover in the country, barely 3.59%.
- So any action that would further curtail the forested land is inadvisable.
- Haryana government should comply with the apex court's order and withdraw the amendment to the PLPA.
- It would go a long way if it takes positive action to protect and rejuvenate the forest cover of the Aravalli hills.

Source: Business Standard, DownToEarth



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