Nestled within the Aravali mountain range, the Aravali Biodiversity Park is 380 acres of wilderness carved out of a nearly 40-year-old mining site. It is an exceptional example of the citizen’s initiative contributing towards the greening of their city. Citizens have participated in a plethora of activities to create this Aravali forest. It is a joint venture between the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG) and iamgurgaon (IAG). Due to the collaborated efforts of the citizens, MCG, corporates, and IAG, this park harbours endangered and rare plants of the Northern Aravali hills (over 300 native species have been recorded). It is also a favoured habitat for over 201 recorded species of birds and various mammal species.

The highly scarred and denuded patches of an abandoned mining site within the Aravali range has been transformed into a lush green forest in 10 years. The severely degraded panchayat land of Nathupur village was transferred to the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram in 2009. This site caught the attention of an NGO, iamgurgaon who proposed the idea of developing the area into a Biodiversity Park. In almost 2 years, 6000 samplings of local species were planted. The park was inaugurated on the 5th of June, 2010 on World Environment Day by the Haryana chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda. Shortly after, MCG ratified the goal of making the Park into a City forest. IAG was formally assigned the tasks of carrying out conservation work, setting up a nursery of native plants, and conducting research and surveys necessary to implement these tasks, from 2012 to 2020.

In 2011, it was suggested to invite the support of corporates for the upkeep of the park. With the generous engagement of 68 corporates, more than 50 schools, thousands of children and citizens in the last 9 years, about 1,45,000 plants of over 200 species have been planted in the park.
BIOGEOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Aravali Biodiversity Park was a part of the Nathapur Village of Gurugram. It is located at the Delhi-Gurugram border on the Mehrauli-Gurugram Road and covers an approximate area of 392 acres. The landscape of the park is a part of the Aravali mountain range with undulating hills and comprises of several small ridges and valleys formed by seasonal streams and quarry pits.

The Aravalis run diagonally across Rajasthan extending from Champaner in Gujarat to near Delhi in the north east for a distance of about 690 km. Most of the rocks seen in Haryana are quartzite-metamorphosed sandstone. The elevation of the Aravali range gradually rises in the south-west direction and so the vegetation pattern and plant composition changes due to the changes in the climatic and edaphic factors. Due to its geographical location, the range has a mix of Saharan, Ethiopian, peninsular, oriental and even Malayan elements of flora and fauna.

For over four decades, this area was extensively mined for the quartzite stone and Badarpur sand which was used for construction activities in the Delhi-NCR region. A large number of small stone quarries were operational in this area. The operation of 8 stone crushers on the Park land along with illegal felling of trees, cattle grazing and waste dumping had caused serious environmental degradation.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The park owned by the State and is governed by the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG). MCG plans to collaborate with NGO/CSOs under the Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative for the maintenance and betterment of the park. The corporation is responsible for security, civil works (repair and development) and assists the NGO, IamGurgaon in raising revenues. Day to day management of the park is looked after by IAG.

In April 2021, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon and the Hero MotoCorp Limited to provide assistance for effective conservation and management of the park.

CONSERVATION INITIATIVES

The primary objective is to increase the green cover, recharge the water level and provide educational, research and recreational avenues to the citizens. Key conservation initiatives include:

- Many seasonal waterbodies, mined pits, and large, barren valley like spaces was infested with alien invasive species Vilayati keekar (Prosopis juliflora). These areas have now been restored with native vegetation that forms several tier forests of trees, shrubs, herbs and grasses. The valleys have now transformed into special micro-habitats within the larger Aravali landscape.
The Haryana Forest Development Corporation (HDFC) planted and maintained 6,000 saplings of local species like Aegle marmelos, Acacias senegal, Acacia leucopholea, Bauhinia racemosa, Tamarindus indicus, Aegle marmalos, Cassia fistula, Albizia procera, Acacia nilotica, Cordia dichotoma, Anogeissus pendula, Ficus religiosa and Ficus benjamina for 2 years before IAG was formally designated to carry out the management and conservation activities.

IAG set up a nursery beginning with just 35 species to more than 200 native species in the last 10 years. The NGO also developed the 8 Aravalli forest types and is responsible for maintaining the forests.

IamGurgaon (IAG) serves a key role in educating the citizens, especially children on the significance of the Aravalis — its flora, fauna, avi-fauna, ecological restoration, and water conservation. The Park has an interpretation centre and in-situ interpretation panels for raising awareness on the above-mentioned subjects. Educational and appreciation walk, and workshops are conducted regularly in the Park to disseminate deeper information on these subjects.

A drip irrigation network has been set up to irrigate areas that are not easily accessible. The water is from the sewage treatment plants of DLF (Delhi Land & Finance) and Hotel Le Meridien and the plants are only irrigated during water scarcity.

**IMPACTS**

- Amidst the severe water crisis in Gurugram, with the groundwater depleting at 5ft per year, the Park serves to recharge over 320 million (32 crores) litres of water annually [1].

- Having restored, the Park is a vast carbon sink and a rich resource for conducting various studies. It now offers opportunities to study carbon sequestering and how climate change is impacting our forests in the semi-arid Aravalis. Additionally, the Park with its different forest communities is used for studies on a) ecological succession b) interspecies dynamics and c) interactions of plants with animals and birds.

- The Park plays an important role in engaging with the citizens and provides them with a recreational space set in natural surroundings.

**IN-SITU CONSERVATION**

The Aravali Biodiversity Park is being restored as a City Forest, showcasing the finest forest flora species of the Northern Aravali range such as Boswellia serrata (Salai), Sterculia Urens (Kullu), Anogeissus pendula (Dhau), Mitragyna parvifolia (Kaim), Wrightia tinctoria (Khirni), Wrightia arborea (Kala indrajao), Holarhenna pubscens (Indrajao), Diospyros cordifolia (Bistendu), Commiphora wightii (Guggul), Helectris isora (Marodphali), Grewia flavescens and many more, along with their associate species as they are found in the rich forests of the Northern Aravalis.
With over 400 species of native plants species (trees, shrubs, herbs, climbers and grasses) it is envisioned as a pristine habitat for birds (resident as well as migratory: close to 195 species were reported in year 2020) and a habitat for wild animals. Asian palm civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*), golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), neelgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*), Indian crested porcupine (*Hystrix indica*), Indian hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), Indian grey mongoose (*Herpestes edwardsii*) including reptiles, amphibians and insects of the Northern Aravali.

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