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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's Water Paradox — From Sacred Resource to Strategic Asset

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

21 March 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**ENVIRONMENT****ECONOMY****SOCIAL ISSUES****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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 The Indian Express

21 March 2026

GS1

GS3



The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Should India adopt a water pricing mechanism that reflects its true economic value, or would that disproportionately affect the poor?"

WHY IN NEWS

The Indian Express editorial examines India's water paradox — a nation that culturally reveres water as sacred yet economically mismanages it through underpricing, inefficient use, groundwater overexploitation, and fragmented governance — and argues for reframing water as a strategic national asset.

THE PARADOX

India receives approximately **4,000 billion cubic metres (BCM)** of precipitation annually — among the highest in the world. Yet it is classified as a **water-stressed nation** (per capita availability below 1,700 cubic metres/year) and is heading toward **water scarcity** (below 1,000 cubic metres/year) by 2050.

THE NUMBERS

Indicator	Value
Annual precipitation	~4,000 BCM
Utilisable water	~1,123 BCM
Per capita water availability (2025)	~1,486 cubic metres/year
Per capita availability (1951)	~5,177 cubic metres/year
Groundwater extraction	India is the world's largest groundwater user (~25% of global extraction)
Agriculture's share of water use	~80%
Water-stressed districts	Over 256 districts face critical or overexploited groundwater levels

THE EDITORIAL'S CORE ARGUMENT

1. Cultural Reverence vs Economic Mismanagement

Rivers are worshipped (Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada, Kaveri) — yet the same rivers are polluted beyond safe limits

Water is treated as a **free good** in agriculture — no meaningful pricing for irrigation water in most states

Free electricity for agriculture (in states like Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu) incentivises **groundwater overexploitation**

The paradox: what is considered sacred is not valued economically

2. Governance Fragmentation

Water is a **State subject** (Entry 17, State List) — but river basins cross state boundaries

Interstate water disputes (Cauvery, Krishna, Mahanadi, Sutlej-Yamuna Link) remain unresolved for decades

Multiple ministries handle water: Jal Shakti, Agriculture, Environment, Urban Development, Power

No single **National Water Authority** with binding powers

3. Agriculture — The Biggest Consumer

Agriculture uses **~80% of India's water** but contributes only **~15% of GDP**

Water-intensive crops (rice, sugarcane) grown in water-scarce regions (Punjab rice, Maharashtra sugarcane)

MSP regime incentivises water-intensive cropping patterns

The editorial calls for **crop diversification** aligned with regional water availability

POLICY FRAMEWORK — WHAT EXISTS

Policy/Programme	Year	Key Provision
National Water Policy	2012 (3rd revision)	Prioritises drinking water; advocates water pricing; promotes recycling
Jal Jeevan Mission	2019	Functional Household Tap Connection to every rural household
Atal Bhujal Yojana	2020	Community-led groundwater management in 7 states; World Bank-supported
Namami Gange	2014	Rs 20,000 crore for Ganga rejuvenation
PMKSY (Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana)	2015	“Per Drop More Crop” — micro-irrigation promotion
Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (DRIP)	2012	World Bank-funded; rehabilitating 736 dams across 19 states

THE STRATEGIC ASSET FRAMEWORK

The editorial proposes reframing water as **strategic infrastructure** — not a welfare entitlement:

Water budgeting — every district should prepare an annual water budget (demand vs supply) before allocating for agriculture, industry, and domestic use

Pricing reform — introduce volumetric water pricing for large farmers and industry; protect small and marginal farmers through targeted subsidies

Circular water economy — mandate wastewater recycling for all urban local bodies; Israel recycles **87% of wastewater** (India: less than 30%)

Groundwater regulation — enforce the Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA) framework; require NOCs for borewells

Crop-water mapping — align MSP incentives with regional water availability; incentivise millets, pulses, oilseeds in water-scarce regions

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON — WATER MANAGEMENT

Country	Approach	Result
Israel	Drip irrigation pioneer; 87% wastewater recycling; desalination; volumetric pricing	Water-secure despite desert climate
Australia	Murray-Darling Basin Plan; water trading markets; cap on extraction	Reduced over-extraction by 30%
Singapore	NEWater (recycled water); desalination; imported water from Malaysia; strict pricing	Near self-sufficiency
India	Free/subsidised water; fragmented governance; no water trading	Water stress worsening

UPSC RELEVANCE

Per capita water availability (1,486 m³/year), India as largest groundwater user, Water as State subject (Entry 17), National Water Policy 2012, Atal Bhujal Yojana (2020), PMKSY (Per Drop More Crop), Namami Gange (Rs 20,000 crore).

MAINS GS1:

Water scarcity and distribution; impact on agriculture and food security.

MAINS GS3:

Water resource management; irrigation efficiency; crop diversification; circular economy; groundwater depletion.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA'S WATER DATA:

- Annual precipitation: ~4,000 BCM; utilisable: ~1,123 BCM
- Per capita availability: ~1,486 m³/year (2025); was 5,177 m³ in 1951
- India is world's largest groundwater user (~25% of global extraction)
- Agriculture uses ~80% of India's water
- Over 256 districts: critical/overexploited groundwater

KEY POLICIES:

- National Water Policy: 2012 (3rd revision)
- Jal Jeevan Mission: 2019 (FHTC to every rural household)
- Atal Bhujal Yojana: 2020 (community-led groundwater management; 7 states)
- PMKSY: 2015 (Per Drop More Crop — micro-irrigation)
- Namami Gange: 2014 (Rs 20,000 crore)
- Water is a State subject: Entry 17, State List

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON:

- Israel: 87% wastewater recycling; drip irrigation pioneer
- Australia: Murray-Darling Basin Plan; water trading markets
- Singapore: NEWater (recycled water) + desalination

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

- Interstate water disputes: Cauvery, Krishna, Mahanadi, SYL Canal
- CGWA: Central Ground Water Authority (regulatory body)
- Water stress threshold: below 1,700 m³/person/year
- Water scarcity threshold: below 1,000 m³/person/year

Sources: [Indian Express](#), [India Water Portal](#)

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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