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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Dry Days Ahead: El Niño Threatens India's 2026 Monsoon

THE HINDU

16 April 2026 · ENVIRONMENT · GEOGRAPHY · ECONOMY · GS3 · GS1

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Dry Days Ahead: El Niño Threatens India's 2026 Monsoon

The Hindu 16 April 2026 GS3 GS1

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"IMD has projected a below-normal 2026 monsoon driven by emerging El Niño conditions, with potential consequences for agriculture, food security, and rural demand. India has improved drought preparedness since 2002 and 2015, but structural vulnerabilities — rainfed agriculture, groundwater depletion, poor crop insurance penetration — remain. How should India respond to a recurring, increasingly predictable climate risk?"

Source: Original editorial ↗ The Hindu

EDITORIAL SUMMARY

The Hindu uses IMD's below-normal 2026 monsoon projection to examine India's structural agricultural vulnerabilities — rainfed dependence, groundwater depletion, low PMFBY coverage, and slow NDMA protocol activation. The editorial calls for automatic monsoon-response protocols triggered by IMD forecasts, rather than reactive crisis management.

EL NIÑO AND INDIA'S MONSOON — THE MECHANISM

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Central Pacific warms (El Niño event)
     ↓
Walker Circulation weakens
     ↓
Indian Ocean temperature gradient reduces
     ↓
Southwest Monsoon weaker inflow
     ↓
Below-normal rainfall in India (historically 8–12% deficit)
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Modulating factor: A positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) — warmer western Indian Ocean — can partially offset El Niño by independently strengthening monsoon inflow. The IOD's status (announced April–May) determines El Niño's actual impact on Indian monsoon.

HISTORICAL EL NIÑO DROUGHT YEARS IN INDIA

YEAR	EL NIÑO INTENSITY	MONSOON DEPARTURE	IMPACT
2002	Moderate	−19%	Severe drought; 21 states affected
2009	Moderate	−23%	Second worst in 35 years
2015	Strong	−14%	12 states declared drought; MGNREGS surge
2023	Strong	−6%	Partial: spatial heterogeneity; SW below-normal

PMFBY — THE INSURANCE GAP

METRIC	VALUE
Launch	2016 (replaced NAIS)
Coverage	~32% of sown area (FY24)
Premium subsidy	50% Central + 25% State + 2% farmer
Claim settlement time	45–60 days (often delayed to 90+)
States opted out	AP, Bihar, West Bengal, Gujarat
Target	Should cover 50%+ of sown area for meaningful risk transfer

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Geography	El Niño mechanism; Indian Ocean Dipole; monsoon patterns
GS3 — Agriculture	Rainfed agriculture; PMFBY; drought resilience; PMKSY
GS3 — Economy	Food inflation; CPI linkage; FCI buffer stocks
GS2 — Governance	NDMA drought manual; disaster preparedness protocols
Mains Keywords	El Niño, Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), IMD long-range forecast, Southwest Monsoon, PMFBY, PMKSY, NDMA drought manual, rainfed agriculture, groundwater depletion, FCI buffer stocks

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

A below-normal 2026 monsoon — driven by El Niño — will stress India's rainfed agriculture sector which still depends on monsoon for ~52% of net sown area, exacerbating food price volatility, groundwater stress, and rural household income vulnerability in ways that government mitigation alone cannot fully offset without structural reform.

✓ SUPPORTING

- El Niño (warming of central-eastern Pacific Ocean) typically weakens the Indian Ocean temperature gradient that drives south-west monsoon — reducing monsoon rainfall by 8–12% in El Niño years historically; 2002, 2009, and 2015 were severe drought years during El Niño. IMD's long-range forecast already signals below-normal distribution.
- India's Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) — the flagship crop insurance — had only ~32% coverage of sown area in FY24; many states have opted out; premium subsidies are large but actual claim settlement is slow. Without insurance, drought losses fall directly on farmers.

- Groundwater depletion has already reduced the buffer capacity of tube-well irrigation: in Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan — India's primary wheat and rice belts — water tables are declining at 0.5–1 metre/year. A drought year reduces recharge, accelerating this structural crisis.
- The Food Corporation of India (FCI) buffer stock (32 million tonnes minimum norm; actual: ~55 million tonnes in April 2026) provides food security buffer — but poor kharif season can reduce procurement, tightening next year's buffer.

⚠ COUNTER

India has meaningfully improved drought resilience since 2002: the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) drought manual (2016), PMFBY, PM-KISAN income support, and expanded MGNREGS activation during droughts provide a social protection floor that did not exist earlier. Some oceanic indicators (Indian Ocean Dipole — IOD) remain positive, partially offsetting El Niño.
A below-normal monsoon need not become a full drought crisis.

→ WAY FORWARD

Four-pillar monsoon resilience strategy: (1) Expand PMFBY penetration urgently — target 50% crop area coverage by 2027 using automatic enrollment for PM-KISAN beneficiaries; (2) Activate pre-positioned drought contingency plans in NDMA by May 2026 — seed distribution, fodder reserves, water body desilting; (3) Accelerate PM Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY) micro-irrigation — drip and sprinkler can cut water demand by 30–50% in drought-vulnerable crops; (4) Advance reservoir management — reduce minimum draw-down levels now to build drought buffer; IMD seasonal forecast must trigger automatic government protocols, not just advisory notices.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

IMD has projected a below-normal monsoon in 2026 linked to El Niño conditions. Analyse the structural vulnerabilities in India''s agricultural system that amplify monsoon shocks, and suggest a

resilience framework. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's Meteorological Department (IMD) has projected a below-normal Southwest Monsoon in 2026, citing emerging El Niño conditions in the Pacific. For a country where ~52% of net sown area is rainfed and agriculture employs ~45% of the workforce, this is not merely a weather forecast — it is a food security, rural income, and macroeconomic risk requiring proactive preparedness rather than reactive response.

BODY

The El Niño mechanism: El Niño involves warming of the central-eastern Pacific Ocean, which shifts atmospheric circulation patterns — weakening the sea-surface temperature gradient between Indian Ocean and Pacific that powers India's southwest monsoon. Historically, El Niño years show 8–12% below-normal rainfall; severe El Niño events in 2002 and 2015 caused widespread drought.

The positive **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)** can partially offset El Niño effects — its status in 2026 is the key modulating variable. **Agricultural vulnerability:** Despite the Green Revolution, India's agriculture remains deeply monsoon-dependent. Punjab and Haryana's groundwater-irrigated wheat-rice system provides a buffer — but groundwater tables are declining 0.5–1 m/year, reducing that buffer capacity over time.

In central India (MP, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh), rainfed kharif crops like soybean, cotton, and pulses are almost entirely monsoon-dependent. **Insurance gap:** PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana), India's primary crop insurance, covers only ~32% of sown area. Slow claim settlement and state opt-outs (AP, Bihar, West Bengal) have reduced trust.

Without insurance, a drought directly translates to farmer income collapse and potential distress sale/migration. **Food price transmission:** Monsoon failure → kharif crop loss → vegetable/pulse price spikes → CPI inflation → RBI policy dilemma. The RBI-agriculture nexus is direct: drought inflation is supply-side, not responsive to rate hikes, creating a policy trap. **Preparedness tools available:** NDMA drought contingency plans (2016 manual), MGNREGS activation, FCI buffer stocks (~55 MT, above the 32 MT norm), and PM-KISAN income support all exist — but require early activation, not post-crisis response.

CONCLUSION

El Niño is a recurring, increasingly predictable feature of India's climate risk landscape. Treating each drought as a novel crisis wastes the value of advance warning.

IMD's long-range forecast must automatically trigger a pre-defined protocol: seed and fodder reserve pre-positioning, PMKSY micro-irrigation acceleration, PMFBY enrollment push, and reservoir management adjustment. India's drought resilience has improved significantly since 2002 — but

structural vulnerabilities in insurance coverage, groundwater management, and rainfed agriculture make the margin for complacency thin.

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