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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Water Governance in India's Peri-Urban Vacuum

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Water Governance in India's Peri-Urban Vacuum

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TH The Hindu | 6 tags

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Peri-urban areas fall between panchayat and municipal jurisdictions — what institutional model would you propose to fix accountability for their water and sanitation?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that India's fast-expanding peri-urban belts — neither fully rural nor formally urban — fall into an administrative and governance vacuum. Classified as Census towns governed by panchayats rather than statutory towns governed by municipalities, they receive neither the piped water of urban schemes nor the groundwater programmes of rural schemes, leaving residents dependent on contaminated shallow aquifers, as seen around Indore. With India holding 18% of the world's population but only 4% of its freshwater and per-capita availability already below the water-stress threshold, the editorial calls for the formal administrative recognition of peri-urban zones, decentralised wastewater treatment, community-based management, and sustainable financing to close the public-health and water-security gap.

THE PERI-URBAN FRONTIER

Peri-urban areas are the **transition zones** between the dense urban core and the rural periphery — the belts where cities spill outward in rapid, often unplanned growth. They are neither fully under municipal corporations nor fully under rural panchayats, and it is precisely this in-between status that defines their predicament.

The crucial classification is the distinction between two kinds of settlement:

- **Statutory towns** — settlements with a notified urban local body (municipal corporation, municipality or nagar panchayat), governed under the **74th Constitutional Amendment**.

- **Census towns** — settlements that meet the Census of India's criteria for urban status (a minimum population, a minimum population density, and a predominantly **non-agricultural workforce**) but which **continue to be governed by panchayats** under the **73rd Amendment**.

The 2011 Census recorded **nearly 3,900 Census towns** (3,894), and the number has grown since. Many peri-urban settlements are exactly these Census towns — urban in their density and economy, rural in their administration.

THE GOVERNANCE VACUUM

This binary classification produces an accountability gap.

SETTLEMENT TYPE	GOVERNING BODY	CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS	WATER/SANITATION REGIME
Statutory town	Municipality / corporation	74th Amendment; 12th Schedule	Urban schemes (AMRUT)
Census town	Panchayat	73rd Amendment; 11th Schedule	Rural schemes (Jal Jeevan Mission)
Peri-urban (in transition)	Falls between the two	Neither cleanly captured	Often neither in practice

A peri-urban settlement governed as a Census town is administered by a panchayat that was never resourced for **urban-scale** water and sewerage, while it is too dense and too non-agricultural to fit the rural delivery model. The result is that it receives **neither piped water under the urban framework nor the groundwater and tap-connection schemes designed for villages**.

THE WATER CRISIS ON THE GROUND

The consequence is a dependence on **contaminated shallow aquifers**. With no formal piped supply under the urban **AMRUT** framework and no functional coverage under the rural **Jal Jeevan Mission**, peri-urban households dig their own borewells and shallow wells.

The **Indore periphery** is a frequently cited example, where peri-urban contamination has been documented. The mechanism is self-reinforcing: in the absence of a sewerage network, households rely on **septic tanks and open drains**, whose effluent leaches into the very **shallow groundwater** that those households then draw for drinking and cooking.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND SCHEME FRAMEWORK

The institutional architecture mirrors — and entrenches — the rural-urban binary.

INSTRUMENT	YEAR	DOMAIN	FOCUS
73rd Amendment	1992	Rural	Panchayati Raj institutions
74th Amendment	1992	Urban	Municipalities; 12th Schedule lists 18 functions including water supply and sanitation
Jal Jeevan Mission	2019	Rural	"Har Ghar Jal" — 100% rural tap connections
AMRUT 2.0	2021	Urban	Urban water supply and sanitation
Swachh Bharat Mission (U + R)	—	Both	Sanitation
Atal Bhujal Yojana	2019	Groundwater	Demand-side groundwater management in selected States

The 12th Schedule, read with **Article 243W**, places water supply and sanitation among municipal functions; the 11th Schedule, read with **Article 243G**, places them among panchayat functions. Neither schedule is written for a settlement that is functionally urban but administratively rural.

WATER AS A CONSTITUTIONAL SUBJECT

The deeper distribution of authority over water complicates the picture.

ENTRY / ARTICLE	ALLOCATION
Entry 17, State List	Water — supply, irrigation, drainage, storage — is a **State subject**
Entry 56, Union List	Regulation of **inter-State rivers** in the public interest
Article 243W + 12th Schedule	Municipal functions, including water and sanitation
Article 243G + 11th Schedule	Panchayat functions, including water and sanitation

Because water is primarily a **State subject**, the Centre's schemes operate as conditional transfers rather than direct mandates, and the peri-urban zone — already orphaned between local bodies — has no clear champion at any level.

THE PUBLIC-HEALTH DIMENSION

The cost of the vacuum is paid in disease. Reliance on contaminated shallow groundwater exposes peri-urban populations to:

- **Waterborne diseases:** cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A and E, and diarrhoeal illness, driven by faecal contamination from septic tanks and open drains.
- **Chemical contamination: fluoride** (causing fluorosis), **arsenic** (causing arsenicosis), **nitrate** and **salinity**, concentrated in affected aquifer belts.

This is the domain of the **WASH** framework — Water, Sanitation and Hygiene — and of **Sustainable Development Goal 6**, which commits India to universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2030. Peri-urban contamination is one of the most direct threats to that commitment.

INDIA'S WATER STRESS

The peri-urban crisis sits within a national water emergency.

- India holds about **18% of the world's population but only about 4% of its freshwater resources**.
- Per-capita water availability has fallen to roughly **1,486 cubic metres**, below the **1,700 cubic metre** threshold at which a country is classed as water-stressed.
- NITI Aayog's **Composite Water Management Index (CWMI)** has tracked the deepening stress, and its 2018 assessment warned that **21 major cities faced "Day Zero"** groundwater-depletion risk.

In this context, the peri-urban dependence on shallow aquifers is not a local inconvenience but a draw on an already strained resource.

DECENTRALISED SOLUTIONS

Because peri-urban belts cannot quickly be plugged into centralised city networks, the most realistic interventions are decentralised:

- **Decentralised Wastewater Treatment Systems (DEWATS)** — local, low-energy treatment of sewage at the settlement scale.
- **Community-based water management** — local user groups managing supply, maintenance and cost recovery.

- **Rainwater harvesting mandates** — capturing roof and surface runoff to reduce groundwater draw.
- **Aquifer recharge** — engineered recharge to stabilise the very shallow aquifers on which residents depend.
- **Greywater recycling** — reuse of household wash water for non-potable purposes.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The structural fix lies in governance design rather than infrastructure alone.

- **Formal administrative recognition** of peri-urban zones — potentially as a distinct third category — so that accountability for water and sanitation is unambiguously fixed.
- **Metropolitan Planning Committees (Article 243ZE)** and **District Planning Committees (Article 243ZD)** — constitutional bodies meant to integrate urban and rural planning across a district or metropolitan region, but which remain **under-utilised or unconstituted** in much of the country.
- **Convergence of the Jal Jeevan Mission and AMRUT 2.0** for peri-urban belts, so that a settlement does not fall between two schemes.

INTERNATIONAL MODELS

Two integrated water-governance models offer instructive contrasts.

- **Singapore — the Public Utilities Board (PUB):** a single integrated water agency managing the entire water cycle, with high-grade reclaimed water (**NEWater**) recycled into the supply.
- **Israel:** among the world's highest rates of **wastewater recycling**, with the large majority of treated effluent reused, principally in agriculture.

Both demonstrate that integrated management and aggressive reuse can stretch scarce water resources far further than a fragmented, jurisdiction-bound system.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 — Governance, urban local bodies, 73rd/74th Amendments / GS Paper 3 — Water resources, urbanisation / GS Paper 1 — Urbanisation and society

- **Peri-urban definition:** transition zone between urban core and rural periphery; rapid, unplanned growth.

- **Statutory vs Census towns:** statutory towns under municipalities (74th Amendment); Census towns meet urban criteria but are governed by panchayats (73rd Amendment); nearly 3,900 Census towns / 3,894 (2011 Census).
- **Constitutional functions:** Article 243W + 12th Schedule (municipal); Article 243G + 11th Schedule (panchayat).
- **Schemes:** Jal Jeevan Mission (2019, rural "Har Ghar Jal"); AMRUT 2.0 (2021, urban); Swachh Bharat Mission (U+R); Atal Bhujal Yojana (2019, groundwater).
- **Water as a subject:** Entry 17 State List; Entry 56 Union List (inter-State rivers).
- **Water stress:** India ~18% of world population, ~4% of freshwater; per-capita availability ~1,486 cubic metres (below the 1,700 stress threshold); NITI Aayog CWMI; 21 cities at "Day Zero" risk (2018).
- **Public health:** cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A/E, diarrhoea; fluoride, arsenic, nitrate, salinity; fluorosis, arsenicosis; WASH; SDG 6.
- **Solutions:** DEWATS, community management, rainwater harvesting, aquifer recharge, greywater recycling; Metropolitan (243ZE) and District (243ZD) Planning Committees; NAQUIM aquifer mapping by CGWB.

Mains Questions:

1. "India's peri-urban belts fall into an administrative vacuum between panchayat and municipal jurisdictions." Examine the institutional roots of their water crisis and suggest reforms.
2. Discuss the role of decentralised wastewater treatment and community-based management in addressing peri-urban water insecurity.
3. "Operationalising Metropolitan and District Planning Committees is the missing link in Indian urban governance." Critically analyse.

Keywords: peri-urban, Census town, statutory town, 73rd and 74th Amendments, Article 243W, Article 243G, 11th and 12th Schedules, Jal Jeevan Mission, AMRUT 2.0, Atal Bhujal Yojana, Entry 17 State List, Entry 56 Union List, Composite Water Management Index, Day Zero, fluoride, arsenic, WASH, SDG 6, DEWATS, NAQUIM, CGWB, Metropolitan Planning Committee (243ZE), District Planning Committee (243ZD), Singapore PUB, NEWater.

The Hindu's view is that the peri-urban water crisis is not, at root, a problem of pipes or pumps but of . A settlement that is urban in its density and rural in its administration belongs to no one's mandate, and so its contaminated borewells belong to no one's responsibility. The fix begins with naming the problem — giving peri-urban zones a formal place in the governance map — and then matching that recognition with convergence of the Jal Jeevan Mission and AMRUT, decentralised treatment, community management with real cost recovery, and the long-promised Metropolitan and District Planning Committees that the 74th Amendment envisaged and most States never built. Water security in India will be won or lost not in the city centre or the distant village, but in the unplanned belt in between.

Sources: The Hindu , PRS , PIB

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Hindu argues that India's fast-expanding peri-urban belts — the transition zones at the edges of cities that are neither fully rural nor formally urban — fall into an administrative and governance vacuum. Because they are typically classified as Census towns governed by panchayats rather than statutory towns governed by municipalities, they receive neither the piped-water and sanitation infrastructure of urban schemes nor the groundwater programmes of rural schemes.
Residents are left dependent on contaminated shallow aquifers, as seen around Indore, amid weak coverage. The editorial recommends the formal administrative recognition of peri-urban zones, decentralised wastewater treatment, community-based management, and sustainable financing to close the public-health and water-security gap.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Peri-urban areas are transition zones between the urban core and the rural periphery, marked by rapid and often unplanned growth. The crucial distinction is between statutory towns (governed by municipalities under the 74th Constitutional Amendment) and Census towns — settlements that meet the census criteria for urban status (population, density and a predominantly non-agricultural workforce) but continue to be governed by panchayats under the 73rd Amendment.

The 2011 Census recorded nearly 3,900 Census towns (3,894), a number that has since grown, leaving large peri-urban populations in this administrative gap.

- The water crisis in these zones is acute. With no piped water under the urban AMRUT framework and no formal coverage under the rural Jal Jeevan Mission, residents depend on contaminated shallow aquifers — the Indore periphery being a frequently cited example.
  Septic tanks and open drains leach into the same groundwater that households draw, producing a cycle of contamination and waterborne disease.
- The scheme architecture mirrors the rural-urban binary that creates the gap: the Jal Jeevan Mission (2019) delivers rural piped water under "Har Ghar Jal"; AMRUT 2.0 (2021) funds urban water supply and sanitation; the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban and Rural) covers sanitation; and the Atal Bhujal Yojana (2019) addresses groundwater management in selected States. Constitutionally, the 12th Schedule (Article 243W) lists water supply and sanitation among municipal functions and the 11th Schedule (Article 243G) among panchayat functions — but neither cleanly captures the peri-urban.
- The public-health and water-security stakes are large. India holds about 18% of the world's population but only about 4% of its freshwater resources, and per-capita water availability has fallen to around 1,486 cubic metres (below the 1,700 cubic metre water-stress threshold).
  NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index (2018) warned that 21 major cities faced "Day Zero" groundwater-depletion risk. Groundwater contamination by fluoride, arsenic, nitrate and salinity produces fluorosis, arsenicosis and waterborne diseases such as cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A and E, and diarrhoea — directly bearing on SDG 6.

⚠ COUNTER

A counter-reading holds that creating a new "peri-urban" administrative category risks adding another tier to an already crowded governance structure, and that the existing answer is simply to reclassify maturing Census towns as statutory towns and extend municipal schemes to them. On this view, the problem is one of timely reclassification and scheme convergence rather than institutional invention, and Metropolitan and District Planning Committees already provide a constitutional mechanism for area planning if only they were operationalised.
This argument, however, understates how long settlements languish in the gap and how acute the public-health cost becomes in the interim.

→ WAY FORWARD

> Grant formal administrative recognition to peri-urban zones so that accountability for their water and sanitation is fixed; converge the Jal Jeevan Mission and AMRUT 2.0 to deliver piped water and treatment in these belts; deploy decentralised wastewater treatment systems (DEWATS) and community-based management with cost recovery; mandate rainwater harvesting and aquifer recharge; operationalise the long-dormant Metropolitan Planning Committees (Article 243ZE) and District Planning Committees (Article 243ZD); use NAQUIM aquifer mapping by the Central Ground Water Board to target interventions; and draw on integrated models such as Singapore's PUB and Israel's high wastewater-reuse system, backed by sustainable financing through user charges and cross-subsidy.

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✍️ MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

"India's peri-urban belts fall into an administrative vacuum between rural and urban governance, producing a water and sanitation crisis that neither panchayat nor municipal schemes reach." Examine the institutional roots of this vacuum and suggest a way forward. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Hindu argues that India's rapidly expanding peri-urban belts — transition zones that are neither fully rural nor formally urban — fall into an administrative vacuum, leaving residents dependent on contaminated shallow aquifers, as around Indore, amid weak piped-water and sanitation coverage. The vacuum is institutional: these settlements are typically Census towns governed by panchayats, not statutory towns governed by municipalities, so they receive neither urban nor rural water schemes.

BODY

The governance gap flows from a binary built into the Constitution. The 73rd Amendment (1992) created panchayats for rural areas and the 74th created municipalities for urban areas, with the 12th Schedule (Article 243W) and 11th Schedule (Article 243G) listing water supply and sanitation among their functions.

But settlements that meet census urban criteria — sufficient population, density and a non-agricultural workforce — are classified as Census towns yet continue to be administered by panchayats; the 2011 Census counted nearly 3,900 such towns (3,894). These peri-urban belts therefore receive neither AMRUT 2.0 (2021) urban piped water nor, in practice, the rural Jal Jeevan Mission (2019), and depend

on contaminated shallow aquifers polluted by septic tanks and open drains.

The stakes are national: India has about 18% of the world's population but only about 4% of its freshwater, per-capita availability has fallen to around 1,486 cubic metres (below the 1,700 cubic metre stress threshold), and NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index (2018) flagged 21 cities at "Day Zero" risk. Contamination by fluoride, arsenic, nitrate and salinity causes fluorosis, arsenicosis and waterborne disease, undermining SDG 6.

Water is a State subject (Entry 17), inter-State rivers a Union subject (Entry 56), and the Atal Bhujal Yojana (2019) addresses groundwater in selected States — but none of these instruments is designed for the peri-urban.

CONCLUSION

The way forward is to give peri-urban zones formal administrative recognition, converge the Jal Jeevan Mission and AMRUT 2.0 for these belts, deploy decentralised wastewater treatment (DEWATS) and community-based management with cost recovery, operationalise Metropolitan (Article 243ZE) and District (Article 243ZD) Planning Committees, and use NAQUIM aquifer mapping to target recharge — drawing on integrated models such as Singapore's PUB and Israel's high wastewater reuse. The vacuum is the problem; fixing accountability is the answer.

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