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SW Monsoon 2026 — Early Kerala Onset, 92% of LPA Below-Normal Forecast

29 May 2026 · GEOGRAPHY · ENVIRONMENT · GS1 · GS3

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WHY IN NEWS:

The **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** declared the onset of the **Southwest Monsoon over Kerala on May 24, 2026 — 8 days earlier than the climatological normal of June 1** and the **earliest onset since 2009**. However, IMD's **seasonal outlook** places **2026 monsoon rainfall at 92% of the Long-Period Average (LPA)** — the **first below-normal forecast since 2023** — raising concerns for kharif sowing, hydropower and rabi water tables.

THE PARADOX — EARLY ONSET, BELOW-NORMAL FORECAST

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Normal onset over Kerala	**June 1** (with standard deviation of ~7 days)
2026 actual onset	**May 24, 2026 — 8 days early** (earliest onset since 2009)
Earliest recorded onset	May 11, 1918
Latest recorded onset	June 18, 1972
2026 seasonal rainfall forecast	**92% of LPA — Below Normal** category
Category boundaries	Deficient (<90%), Below Normal (90-95%), Normal (96-104%), Above Normal (105-110%), Excess (>110%)
LPA reference period	**1971-2020**; LPA value = **87 cm** (870 mm)
Probability of below-normal	IMD's tercile probability forecast assigns elevated probability to below-normal category

Early onset does **not** guarantee surplus seasonal rainfall. The two metrics are independent — onset is a synoptic-scale event; seasonal rainfall depends on many large-scale climate drivers.

WHAT DRIVES THE INDIAN MONSOON

DRIVER	MECHANISM	2026 STATUS
ENSO (El Niño-Southern Oscillation)	Warm Eastern Pacific (El Niño) typically depresses Indian rainfall; cold (La Niña) enhances it	**Neutral leaning towards weak La Niña** by August
Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)	Positive IOD (warmer western IO) enhances monsoon; negative reduces it	**Forecast: weakly positive**
Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO)	Tropical wave pattern; affects intra-seasonal rainfall variability	Variable, monitored on 7-15 day timescales
Eurasian snow cover	More snow → cooler land → weaker monsoon (Walker's law)	Below-normal Eurasian winter snow → favourable
Sea Surface Temperatures (SST) in West Pacific, Equatorial IO	Modulate atmospheric circulation	Mixed signals
Arctic Sea Ice	Indirect teleconnection	Below-normal extent

The **2026 forecast at 92% of LPA** is driven primarily by **early-season SST configuration** and **EuroAsian climatic patterns** — not by ENSO/IOD alone.

THE MONSOON ONSET PROCESS

STAGE	APPROXIMATE DATE	WHAT HAPPENS
Burst over Andaman & Nicobar Islands	May 15-20	Monsoon enters Indian airspace
Onset over Kerala	June 1 (normal) / **May 26 (2026)**	Heavy rainfall sustained over Kerala coast; cross-equatorial flow set up
Northward progression	June-July	Covers Konkan, Goa, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, MP
Eastward extension	June-July	Covers NE India, West Bengal, Bihar
Pan-India coverage	~July 8	Full country covered
Withdrawal begins	September 17 (NW India)	South-West monsoon retreats; NE monsoon begins over Tamil Nadu

For the **official onset declaration** over Kerala, IMD uses three criteria simultaneously:

1. **Rainfall** ≥ 60% of 14 designated stations in Kerala-Lakshadweep receive ≥ 2.5 mm rainfall for two consecutive days.
2. **Westerly winds** at 600 hPa with zonal wind speed ≥ 15-20 knots.
3. **Outgoing Longwave Radiation (OLR)** value < 200 W/m² (indicating deep convection).

WHY "BELOW NORMAL" MATTERS

SECTOR	
Kharif agriculture	Rice, cotton, soybean, maize, sugarcane — combined **~50% of India's annual food production** sourced from kharif
Reservoir storage	~3,500 large reservoirs across India; SW monsoon refills them
Hydropower	**~47 GW** installed; reduced runoff = lower generation in Q3-Q4 FY27
Rabi sowing	Rabi (Nov-Apr) depends on residual soil moisture + reservoir storage
Rural wages	MGNREGS demand surges during below-normal monsoon years
Inflation	Food inflation sensitivity — Q3 FY27 CPI prints to watch
Drinking water	Urban + rural tankers; Bengaluru, Chennai vulnerable

SPATIAL VARIABILITY

A national 92% LPA hides large state-level variation. IMD's regional forecasts typically show:

REGION	TYPICAL 2026 FORECAST (ILLUSTRATIVE)
Northwest India (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, MP, Gujarat)	Below normal
Central India	Normal to below normal
South Peninsula	Variable, leaning normal
Northeast India	Below normal
Hilly region	Variable

POLICY ARCHITECTURE — IMD + BEYOND

AGENCY	ROLE
IMD	Operational weather forecasting; issues monsoon forecasts in **April (long-range)**, **May (updated)**, **monthly updates** through season
Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES)	Nodal ministry
National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF)	Numerical weather prediction
India Meteorological Department (IMD) Pune	Climate research
Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM)	Coupled ocean-atmosphere modelling
Central Water Commission (CWC)	Reservoir storage tracking
Department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare (DA&FW)	Sowing/yield monitoring
PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana)	Crop insurance covering ~12-15% gross cropped area
National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)	Drought/flood response

CLIMATE CHANGE SIGNAL

Recent research suggests:

- **Increasing intra-seasonal variability** — longer dry spells punctuated by heavy rainfall events.
- **Westward shift** of monsoon depressions.
- **Decreasing trend in central India rainfall**; **increasing trend in NE India** (per IPCC AR6 + IITM analyses).
- **Heavy rainfall events** (>150 mm/day) increasing in frequency.
- **Earlier onsets becoming more variable** — both very early and very late onsets in recent years.
- **Net seasonal rainfall** essentially flat over 50 years; redistribution within season is the change.

WATCHPOINTS

- **June 1-30 rainfall** — critical for sowing window for paddy, soybean, cotton.
- **El Niño/La Niña evolution** — IMD updates June onwards.
- **Reservoir storage trajectory** — already below-normal in central India.
- **MGNREGS demand** — leading indicator of rural distress.
- **Vegetable inflation** — onion, tomato spikes have macro implications.
- **Bond and FX markets** — RBI's monetary path depends partly on monsoon outturn.

WAY FORWARD

- **Crop diversification** in vulnerable regions — millets (Shree Anna Mission), pulses.
- **Micro-irrigation** scale-up — PM-KSY drip and sprinkler subsidies.
- **Watershed management** — combination of rain-water harvesting and decentralised storage.
- **PMFBY coverage deepening** — most farmers still outside insurance.
- **Weather-based crop insurance** — moving from yield-loss to weather-index products.
- **Early warning systems** — district-level + sub-district level rainfall forecasts.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1 — Indian Geography / Physical Geography:

- Climatology — monsoon dynamics, ENSO, IOD.

GS Paper 3 — Agriculture / Environment / Disaster Management:

- Major crops, cropping patterns, e-technology in the aid of farmers.
- Disaster and disaster management — drought, flood.
- Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation.

Analytical hooks for Mains:

- Climate change and Indian monsoon — increasing variability.
- Early onset vs seasonal rainfall — methodological lessons.
- Drought preparedness in a changing monsoon regime.

FACTS CORNER

Normal SW Monsoon onset over Kerala: June 1 (±7 days SD).

2026 actual onset: May 24, 2026 — 8 days early (earliest since 2009).

Earliest onset on record: May 11, 1918; latest onset: June 18, 1972.

2026 IMD seasonal forecast: 92% of LPA — Below Normal.

LPA reference period: 1971-2020; LPA value 87 cm (870 mm).

Categories: Deficient (<90%), Below Normal (90-95%), Normal (96-104%), Above Normal (105-110%), Excess (>110%).

Onset criteria (IMD): ≥60% of 14 Kerala-Lakshadweep stations with ≥2.5 mm rainfall over 2 days + westerly winds at 600 hPa + OLR < 200 W/m².

Key drivers: ENSO, IOD, MJO, Eurasian snow cover.

Issued by: IMD under Ministry of Earth Sciences.

Withdrawal of SW Monsoon (NW India): September 17 (normal).

NE Monsoon (Tamil Nadu): October-December.

Kharif crops share of food production: ~50%.

IMD established: 1875 (HQ New Delhi; key centre Pune).

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Sources: IMD, Ministry of Earth Sciences, The Hindu

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