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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

El Nino on a Razor's Edge: A Monsoon Deficit Tests India's Food Security Buffer

THE HINDU

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El Nino on a Razor's Edge: A Monsoon Deficit Tests India's Food Security Buffer

The Hindu 25 June 2026 GS3 GS1

Source: ujiyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a single bad monsoon can still rattle food prices and rural incomes after decades of irrigation expansion and record buffer stocks, has India genuinely drought-proofed its agriculture, or merely deferred the reckoning?"

Every fact web-verified against primary sources (https://ujiyari.com/how-we-verify/)

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS

Every June, the same question quietly decides the fate of the Indian economy: will the rains come on time, and will they be enough? In 2026 the answer is fraught (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/fraught/). A developing El Nino is suppressing the moisture inflow that the southwest monsoon depends on, and the season has opened with a wide cumulative rainfall deficit. The Hindu's framing, that El Nino has India "on a razor's edge," captures the tension precisely. On one side sits a genuine buffer of grain stocks and irrigation; on the other, a rain-fed farm economy that a bad season can still wound deeply.

For an aspirant, this is a near-perfect integrated theme. It sits at the intersection of GS1 physical geography (the monsoon mechanism, ENSO, the IOD) and GS3 (agriculture, food security, inflation and disaster preparedness). Learn to argue it both as a climate-system question and as a political-economy question.

THE LIFT LINE

> *A buffer stock can defend the price line, but it cannot irrigate a field. India's resilience (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/resilience/) to a deficient monsoon is real but finite, and El Nino is a reminder that the country has managed its food risk far better than it has managed its rainfall risk.*

THE CORE ARGUMENT

The editorial's central claim is that a developing El Nino is widening the seasonal deficit and exposing the structural vulnerability (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/vulnerability/) of rain-fed agriculture, even as the food security buffer offers a partial and time-limited cushion.

The chain of reasoning runs like this. First, the southwest monsoon supplies the dominant share of annual rainfall and is the lifeblood of the kharif sowing season. Second, roughly half of India's net sown area is rain-fed, meaning it depends directly on the timing and spread of these rains rather than on assured canal or tube-well irrigation. Third, an El Nino phase tends to suppress monsoon rainfall, and the season has begun with a large early deficit while most of the seasonal total is still due in July and August. Fourth, reservoir storage is low, so the margin for error in the second half is thin. Set against this is the cushion: comfortable FCI buffer stocks, a functioning MSP regime and the option of open-market grain releases. The conclusion is sober rather than alarmist. The buffer buys time and defends cereal prices, but it does not protect rain-fed incomes or guarantee a normal season.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT IT

When you meet a "monsoon and food security" prompt, resist the instinct to treat it as a weather story. Train yourself to split it into three layers and argue each.

Layer 1: The climate system (GS1)

The southwest monsoon runs from June to September and is driven by the differential heating of land and sea and the seasonal reversal of winds. Two large-scale modulators matter for the exam:

- **ENSO (El Nino-Southern Oscillation):** El Nino is the warm phase, marked by abnormal warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific. It tends to weaken the monsoon circulation and is statistically associated with below-normal Indian rainfall, though not in every instance. La Nina, the cool phase, is broadly the opposite.
- **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD):** A positive IOD (warmer western Indian Ocean) can support the monsoon and partly offset an El Nino, which is why forecasters watch the two together rather than in isolation.

The honest analytical point is that El Nino raises the probability of a weak monsoon; it does not guarantee one. The IOD and intra-seasonal oscillations can still tilt the outcome.

Layer 2: The forecasting and water apparatus (GS1 and GS3)

The **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** issues the long range forecast and expresses it against the **Long Period Average (LPA (https://ujiyari.com/terms/lpa-long-period-average-monsoon/))**, the benchmark mean of seasonal rainfall over a long reference period. Rainfall is classed relative to the LPA (normal is conventionally 96 to 104 percent of LPA). For 2026, the IMD's forecast pointed to below-normal rainfall and

an elevated chance of a deficient season, and the early-June cumulative deficit ran sharply below the long-term average. Reservoir storage, tracked by the **Central Water Commission (CWC)**, was running low for the date, tightening the cushion for irrigation, drinking water and hydropower if July and August underperform.

> *Diagram in words: picture three reservoirs feeding one tank labelled "kharif outcome." The first reservoir is rainfall (the largest), the second is stored reservoir water, the third is groundwater. El Nino lowers the inflow into the first; a low CWC level means the second is already shallow. The tank can still fill if July and August deliver, but the safety margin has shrunk.*

Layer 3: The food-security buffer (GS3)

This is where the state's tools enter. The **Food Corporation of India (FCI)** holds buffer stocks against defined norms; the **Minimum Support Price (MSP)** underpins procurement of key cereals; and the government can release grain through open-market sales to cool prices. Together these can blunt (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/blunt/) a spike in cereal inflation. But two limits must be stated in any balanced answer. The buffer protects availability and cereal prices, not the lost income of the rain-fed farmer. And it does not anchor the prices of pulses, vegetables and other items that are far more sensitive to a poor monsoon and far less amenable to public procurement.

THE COUNTER-VIEW

A strong answer never lets the alarm run unchallenged. The reasonable counter is that El Nino is not destiny. The IOD and intra-seasonal factors can offset the Pacific signal, and the monsoon has historically recovered after weak openings. India today irrigates a larger share of its cropped area than it did during the droughts of 1972, 2002 or 2009, and it holds grain stocks and import options that earlier governments lacked. On this reading, the system is more shock-absorbent than the headlines suggest, and the correct posture is vigilant preparation, not panic.

The synthesis, and the line an examiner rewards, is that resilience has improved at the level of national food availability but not at the level of the individual rain-fed household. The buffer has bought the country time; it has not bought the farmer rain.

WAY FORWARD

- **Pre-position contingency (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/contingency/) measures:** ready fodder banks, relief and contingency cropping plans that can be triggered the moment sub-divisional rainfall data confirm a shortfall.

- **Deepen the water cushion:** accelerate micro-irrigation (per-drop-more-crop), watershed development and aquifer (https://ujiyari.com/terms/aquifer/) recharge so that rain-fed tracts are less exposed to a single failed spell.
- **Shift the seed basket:** promote short-duration and drought-tolerant varieties and millets, which tolerate erratic rainfall better than long-duration paddy.
- **Calibrate** (https://ujiyari.com/vocab/calibrate/) **market intervention:** use open-market grain releases and import calendars proactively to pre-empt cereal inflation rather than chase it.
- **Sharpen the forecast:** strengthen IMD sub-divisional and extended-range forecasting so that farmers and administrators act on real-time signals, not season-end hindsight.

PRELIMS POINTERS

- The southwest monsoon runs June to September and supplies the bulk of India's annual rainfall.
- El Nino is the warm phase of ENSO (central and eastern equatorial Pacific warming); it is associated with a higher probability of below-normal Indian monsoon rainfall.
- A positive IOD can partly counter an El Nino's suppressing effect on the monsoon.
- The IMD issues the long range forecast; rainfall is benchmarked against the Long Period Average (LPA), with normal conventionally 96 to 104 percent of LPA.
- Reservoir live storage is monitored and reported by the Central Water Commission (CWC).
- Roughly half of India's net sown area is rain-fed.
- Food security buffer tools: FCI buffer stocks, MSP-backed procurement and open-market sales.

PYQ LINKAGE

- "Discuss the meaning of colour-coded weather warnings for cyclone-prone areas given by the IMD." (Tests familiarity with the IMD's operational role, which underpins monsoon and disaster preparedness in this theme.)
- "How far do you agree that the behaviour of the Indian monsoon has been changing due to humanly-induced environmental changes?" (Direct GS1 monsoon-variability anchor.)
- "What characteristics can be assigned to monsoon climate that succeeds in feeding more than 50 percent of the world population residing in Monsoon Asia?" (Connects monsoon dependence to food security, the exact pivot of this editorial.)

Use this editorial as your model answer for any "monsoon, El Nino and food security" prompt: open with the climate system, move to the forecasting and water apparatus, weigh the buffer honestly, and close on the gap between national availability and household income.

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

A developing El Nino is suppressing moisture inflow and widening the southwest monsoon deficit, exposing the structural vulnerability of India's rain-fed agriculture while a robust but finite buffer stock buys the government only limited time to manage the food security and inflation risk.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Roughly half of India's net sown area remains rain-fed, so a deficient monsoon directly threatens kharif sowing, rural incomes and the wider agrarian economy regardless of irrigation gains elsewhere.
- With most seasonal rain still due in July and August and reservoir storage sitting low, the early cumulative deficit narrows the margin for recovery and raises the risk to drinking water, irrigation and hydropower.
- Comfortable FCI buffer stocks and an active MSP regime provide a real cushion against price spikes, but they are a finishing tool, not a substitute for a normal rainfall season.

⚠ COUNTER

Optimists argue that El Nino is not destiny: the IOD and intra-seasonal factors can offset it, irrigation now covers a larger share of cropped area than during past droughts, and India's grain stocks and import options give it far more resilience than in 1972 or 2009.

→ WAY FORWARD

Pre-position relief and fodder, accelerate micro-irrigation and watershed recharge, promote short-duration and drought-tolerant varieties, calibrate open-market grain releases to pre-empt inflation, and strengthen IMD sub-divisional forecasting so contingency cropping plans can be triggered in real time.

MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

The southwest monsoon remains the central variable in India's agrarian economy despite expansion of irrigation and grain buffers. In the context of a developing El Nino and a widening seasonal rainfall deficit, examine the vulnerability of India's rain-fed agriculture and assess the adequacy of the food security buffer in cushioning the shock. Suggest a way forward. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The southwest monsoon (June to September) delivers the bulk of India’s annual rainfall and underwrites the kharif crop. A developing El Nino, by warming the equatorial Pacific and suppressing moisture inflow, has widened the early-season deficit, placing rain-fed agriculture and food security under scrutiny.

BODY

Around half of India’s net sown area is rain-fed, so the monsoon’s distribution, not merely its total, governs sowing decisions for rice, pulses, oilseeds and coarse cereals. An El Nino year typically raises the probability of below-normal rainfall, and the IMD’s Long Period Average framework shows the season tracking below the LPA with an elevated chance of a deficient outcome.

Because most seasonal rain is still due in July and August, an early deficit compresses the recovery window and, with reservoir storage running low, strains irrigation, drinking water and hydropower. The cushion lies in FCI buffer stocks, a functioning MSP-backed procurement system and open-market sales that can blunt cereal inflation.

Yet buffers address availability and price, not the income loss of rain-fed farmers or the second-order pressure on rural demand and pulses and vegetable prices, which procurement does not anchor. The Indian Ocean Dipole and intra-seasonal oscillations can still moderate the El Nino signal, so the outcome is probabilistic rather than predetermined.

CONCLUSION

The episode confirms that buffer stocks buy time but do not buy resilience. Drought-proofing demands sustained investment in micro-irrigation, watershed recharge, drought-tolerant varieties and sharper sub-divisional forecasting, so that a single adverse season no longer threatens both the plate and the price line.

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