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Coal Stocks Turn Critical at 45 Thermal Plants as the Monsoon Runs 13 Per Cent Short

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Every fact web-verified against primary sources

> *Government data as of* **August 25, 2026**, *reported on* **August 27**, *showed* **45 thermal power plants holding critically low coal stocks**, *up sharply from* **31 at the end of July**. *Separately,* **India Meteorological Department** *data through* **August 26** *placed cumulative southwest monsoon rainfall* **13 per cent below the long period average**, *with* **14 states and union territories** *in deficit.*

THE COAL POSITION

INDICATOR	POSITION
Plants at critical stock	**45**, up from **31** at end-July
Of which domestic-coal-fired	**40**
Aggregate stocks	**30.95 million tonnes**
Days of requirement covered	About **10 days**, against **12 days** in July
Drawdown from end-July	About **19 per cent**
Fall over the first three weeks of August	**15.5 per cent**

The definition matters. A plant is classified as **critical** when its coal stock falls **below 25 per cent of the required normative inventory**, or when it holds **fuel for fewer than three days**.

The cause is logistics rather than geology. Heavy rainfall in **Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh**, the three principal coal-producing States, disrupted **mining operations and rail loading**. Some plants received only about **half of the five to six daily railway rakes** they require. Coal was not unavailable at the pithead; it could not be moved.

Monitoring is by the **Central Electricity Authority (CEA)**, the statutory body under the **Electricity Act, 2003**.

THE MONSOON POSITION

PERIOD	DEPARTURE FROM NORMAL
June 2026	about **35 per cent below** normal
July 2026	**1 per cent above** normal
August 2026 (to August 24)	**15 per cent below** normal
Season to August 26	**13 per cent below** the long period average

Fourteen states and union territories were in deficit. The primary driver is a strengthening **El Niño**, the warm phase of the **El Niño-Southern Oscillation**, characterised by anomalous warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific and historically associated with a weakened Indian monsoon.

> *The widely reported claims that this will be* **India's weakest monsoon since 2009** *and that the season will close around* **15 per cent below normal** *are* **assessments carried in agency reporting rather than official IMD seasonal forecasts**. *IMD's own Second Stage forecast placed the season at* **90 per cent of LPA**, *which sits exactly on the Deficient boundary defined above. The* **13 per cent deficit through August 26 is the verified figure**. *Use the verified number and attribute the projection as a projection.*

The IMD's own classification, which is directly examinable:

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Normal	Long period average **±4 per cent**
Below Normal	**90 to 96 per cent** of LPA
Deficient	**Less than 90 per cent of LPA**

The **long period average**, on the 1971 to 2020 baseline, is **87 centimetres** for the June to September season.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO STORIES

These are usually reported separately. They belong together, and the relationship is more interesting than it first appears.

The naive reading is that a weak monsoon caused the coal crisis. It did not, at least not directly. **The coal crisis was caused by too much rain, not too little**, in three specific States where mining and rail evacuation happen.

That apparent contradiction is the analytical point. A season can be **13 per cent deficient nationally** while delivering **disruptive excess in particular districts in particular weeks**. Monsoon performance is not a single number; it is a distribution across space and time, and a national aggregate conceals exactly the variance that does the damage. The same season can simultaneously produce drought stress in fourteen States and rain-halted coal loading in three.

The demand side then closes the loop. A deficient, hotter monsoon raises electricity demand for cooling and for irrigation pumping precisely when reservoir storage is low, which reduces hydropower availability and shifts load onto thermal generation. **So the monsoon squeezes coal from both ends: it interrupts supply through localised excess, and it raises demand through aggregate deficiency.**

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The structural fact is that India's coal buffer is measured in days, not weeks. Ten days of stock in a system where roughly **70 per cent of electricity generation is coal-fired** is a thin margin. Recurrence is the tell: comparable crises occurred in 2021 and 2022, and now in 2026.

Recurrence points to logistics, not to production. Coal India's output has risen substantially over the period in which these crises have recurred. What has lagged is **rail evacuation capacity, washery capacity and pithead stocking**. A coal shortage in which coal exists but cannot move is an infrastructure problem wearing the costume of a resource problem, and the policy response should follow the diagnosis: dedicated freight corridors, additional rakes, mechanised loading silos and larger pithead stockyards.

The renewables argument needs to be made carefully. It is true that India's non-fossil capacity has expanded rapidly and that the target framework points towards **500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030**. It is also true that **solar generation does not help at 10 p.m.**, which is when the evening peak occurs and when coal stocks are actually drawn down. Without **storage**, meaning battery energy storage systems and pumped hydro, and without transmission to move power between regions, renewable capacity addition does not reduce the coal buffer requirement. **Capacity is not availability.**

On the agricultural side, a 13 per cent seasonal deficit transmits through several channels: kharif sowing and yields in rice, pulses and oilseeds; food inflation and therefore the Monetary Policy Committee's room; reservoir storage and hence rabi irrigation and hydropower; and rural wages with consequent MGNREGA demand. Several buffers have blunted monsoon shocks relative to earlier decades, including buffer stocks under the **National Food Security Act, 2013**, income transfers under **PM-KISAN**, crop insurance under **PMFBY**, and the expansion of irrigated area under **PMKSY**. The vulnerability is now concentrated in **rainfed districts and in unirrigated crops**, which is a narrower but not smaller problem.

One counterweight to watch is the Indian Ocean Dipole. A positive IOD can partially offset El Niño's suppressing effect on the Indian monsoon, and any assessment of the season's final outcome that ignores it is incomplete.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 1: Climatology, including the Indian monsoon and factors influencing it; distribution of key natural resources.

GS Paper 3: Infrastructure including energy; conservation and environmental issues; agriculture, cropping patterns and food security; growth and development.

Prelims angle: the definition of a critical coal stock, the long period average figure and IMD's rainfall categories, the CEA's statutory basis, and El Niño's relationship to the Indian monsoon are all directly examinable.

Mains angle: *"India's coal crises are evacuation crises."* Argue that recurrence despite rising production points to logistics, and connect the storage gap to why renewable capacity addition has not yet reduced the thermal buffer requirement.

FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

COAL POSITION, AS OF 25 AUGUST 2026:

45 plants at critical stock, up from 31 at end-July. 40 of the 45 are domestic-coal-fired.

Critical means stocks below 25 per cent of normative inventory or fewer than three days' fuel.

Aggregate stocks: 30.95 million tonnes, about 10 days of requirement, against 12 days in July.

19 per cent drawdown from end-July; 15.5 per cent fall over the first three weeks of August.

Cause: heavy rain in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh disrupting mining and rail loading; some plants received about half of the five to six daily rakes required.

Monitoring body: Central Electricity Authority (CEA), statutory under the Electricity Act, 2003.

NTPC is India's largest thermal generator. Coal India Limited is the dominant producer. Singareni Collieries is the other major public producer, jointly owned by the Government of Telangana and the Centre.

There is no coal entry in the Concurrent List. Regulation of mines and mineral development is Union List Entry 54, to the extent Parliament declares it expedient in the public interest, and State List Entry 23, subject to List I. Coal is a major mineral regulated by the Union under the MMDR Act, 1957. Electricity is the Concurrent List subject: Entry 38, List III. The Ministry of Coal is the nodal ministry.

MONSOON POSITION, TO 26 AUGUST 2026:

Season cumulative: 13 per cent below the long period average. 14 states and union territories deficient.

June: about 35 per cent below normal. July: 1 per cent above. August: about 15 per cent below through the 24th.

IMD's Second Stage forecast placed the season at 90 per cent of LPA.

Driver: a strengthening El Niño, the warm phase of ENSO.

IMD categories: Normal = LPA ±4 per cent; Below Normal = 90 to 96 per cent of LPA; Deficient = less than 90 per cent of LPA.

Long period average (1971 to 2020 baseline): 87 cm for June to September.

Claims of the weakest monsoon since 2009 and a final deficit near 15 per cent are projections attributed to IMD sources, not official forecasts.

MONSOON CONCEPTS:

El Niño: anomalous warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific; associated with a weak Indian monsoon. La Niña is the cool phase, associated with a strong monsoon.

Southern Oscillation: the see-saw in sea-level pressure between Tahiti and Darwin; together with El Niño it forms ENSO.

Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD): temperature gradient between the western and eastern equatorial Indian Ocean. A positive IOD favours a good Indian monsoon and can partially offset El Niño.

Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO): an eastward-moving pulse of cloud and rainfall affecting monsoon active and break spells.

Historical normal dates: the southwest monsoon sets in over Kerala around 1 June and withdraws from western Rajasthan from about 17 September.

ENERGY POLICY ANCHORS:

Roughly 70 per cent of India's electricity generation is coal-based.

Target framework: 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030; net zero by 2070, announced at COP26 in Glasgow.

Storage instruments: battery energy storage systems (BESS) and pumped storage hydropower.

Section 11 of the Electricity Act, 2003 allows the government to direct a generating company to operate in extraordinary circumstances, the provision used to compel imported-coal plants to run.

Coal-bearing States: Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana. The Gondwana formations hold the bulk of India's coal.

AGRICULTURAL TRANSMISSION CHANNELS:

Kharif sowing and yields; food inflation and the MPC's policy room; reservoir storage for rabi irrigation and hydropower; rural wages and MGNREGA demand.

Buffers: National Food Security Act, 2013; PM-KISAN; PMFBY crop insurance; PMKSY irrigation; Atal Bhujal Yojana for groundwater.

WATCH THE TRAP:

The coal crisis was caused by excess rain in mining States, not by the national rainfall deficit. Both statements are true simultaneously.

Critical stock is defined at 25 per cent of normative inventory or under three days, not at zero.

El Niño weakens the Indian monsoon; La Niña strengthens it. These are routinely inverted in options.

Deficient in IMD terms means less than 90 per cent of LPA, a departure of more than 10 per cent, not any shortfall at all. Exactly 90 per cent falls in Below Normal.

Electricity is Concurrent (Entry 38, List III); coal is not. Mines and mineral development sits in Union List Entry 54 and State List Entry 23. These two are routinely confused.

Sources: Central Electricity Authority, India Meteorological Department, Ministry of Coal

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