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India's 2026 Kharif Season Under Pressure: A Weak Monsoon, Emerging El Nino, and the Buffer Stocks Standing Between Farmers and a Price Shock

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India's 2026 kharif, or summer cropping, season has opened under conditions significantly weaker than the year before. As of early July 2026, cumulative monsoon rainfall stood roughly 20 percent below the long period average, and the area sown to *kharif* crops was down close to 21 percent year on year, with rice, pulses, and coarse cereals recording the sharpest declines in acreage. The shortfall coincides with the onset of El Nino conditions in the Pacific, a weather pattern that has historically weakened India's southwest monsoon and disrupted the sowing window for rain-fed crops. This article documents the current state of the 2026 kharif season using the most recent meteorological and sowing data available, explains the mechanics linking El Nino to Indian rainfall, and examines how the government and farmers are responding. It gives particular attention to a feature of the current situation that distinguishes it from earlier monsoon-shortfall years: unusually large government stocks of rice and wheat, several times the mandated buffer norm, which give policymakers room to manage domestic supply even if the *kharif* harvest disappoints, in sharp contrast to the near-total export ban already imposed on sugar in anticipation of tighter cane supplies. The article concludes that the immediate food-price risk from this season's weak start appears more contained than in past El Nino years, though the underlying agronomic stress on rain-fed farmers, and the risk to future harvests if El Nino persists, remains real and worth watching closely through the remainder of the monsoon.

Introduction

The southwest monsoon delivers roughly seventy percent of India's annual rainfall and, with it, determines the fate of the kharif season, the summer cropping period in which rice, pulses, coarse cereals, oilseeds, cotton, and sugarcane are sown between June and early August for harvest later in the year. A monsoon that arrives late or delivers rainfall unevenly across the country does not simply reduce yields at the margin; it can compress or entirely miss the narrow sowing window for water-sensitive crops such as rice, pushing farmers toward lower-value substitute crops or, in the worst case, leaving fields unsown for the season. The 2026 monsoon has, by early July, delivered exactly this kind of uneven and delayed start. The India Meteorological Department's own seasonal outlook had already flagged a below-normal rainfall risk before the season began, citing the likely emergence of El Nino conditions in the Pacific Ocean, a climate pattern with a well-documented history of weakening the Indian summer monsoon. What has followed in the weeks since is a season that industry and government trackers are now watching closely, both for what it tells us about India's

immediate food price outlook and for what it suggests about the country's growing reliance on buffer stocks and contingency planning to manage exactly this kind of climate risk.

The Numbers So Far

India's average cumulative monsoon rainfall through the first week of July 2026 stood at roughly 170.7 millimetres, about 20 percent below the long period average, according to a widely cited market analysis compiled from the data of India Meteorological Department (IMD). The shortfall has not been evenly distributed. East and Northeast India, home to major rice and jute-growing regions including Bihar, faced the steepest deficit, at roughly 41 percent below normal, while Northwest India recorded a smaller deficit of about 19 percent, Central India ran about 5 percent below normal, and South India was actually running some 15 percent above the long period average.

The consequence for planting has been significant. As of the first week of July 2026, the area sown to *kharif* crops nationally stood at about 35.1 million hectares, it is down close to 21 percent from roughly 44.3 million hectares at the same point the previous year. Some trackers using slightly earlier data points recorded an even steeper year-on-year decline of around 23 percent in late June, before a modest recovery in sowing pace as rainfall activity improved through early July. Rice, pulses, and coarse cereals have recorded the sharpest acreage declines among major crop groups, while sugarcane, jute, and mesta, crops with different planting calendars and generally more assured irrigation, have held their sowing pace closer to the previous year's level.

Why This Season Is Different: The El Nino Mechanism

El Nino refers to a periodic warming of sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean that alters atmospheric circulation patterns across a wide swath of the globe. For India, the historical relationship is well established: El Nino years are disproportionately associated with weaker, more erratic southwest monsoons, since the same shift in Pacific pressure systems that defines El Nino tends to suppress the moisture-laden winds that would otherwise sweep across the Indian subcontinent through the June to September monsoon season.

Meteorological trackers had flagged this risk well before the 2026 season began, with the India Meteorological Department's pre-season outlook forecasting rainfall at around 90 percent of the long period average and assigning a meaningfully elevated probability to below-normal or deficient rainfall as El Nino conditions strengthened through the middle of the year. One partial offsetting factor is that the Indian Ocean Dipole, a separate and independent driver of monsoon strength linked to temperature differences across the Indian Ocean, has so far remained in a neutral state this season rather than compounding the El Nino effect, a combination that analysts note has historically produced a weak but not catastrophic monsoon outcome, provided the dipole does not shift into a negative phase as the season progresses.

How Farmers Are Experiencing the Shortfall

For farmers in rain-fed districts, the abstract statistics translate into concrete, difficult decisions made in real time. Growers in parts of Haryana and Punjab who had already committed land and inputs to rice this season have described the anxiety of watching a sowing window narrow without adequate rainfall, weighing whether to proceed with a crop that may yield far below its normal potential or to hold back and risk missing the season's window entirely. Input supply has compounded the uncertainty in some areas, with farmers in parts of northern India reporting delays in receiving the staged fertiliser allocations that rice cultivation typically requires at specific growth stages, a logistical strain that becomes more consequential when a delayed monsoon has already compressed the usable planting calendar.

Agricultural economists tracking the season have offered differing views on how much of this stress will ultimately reach consumers as higher food prices. Some argue that even a meaningful production shortfall, on the order of 30 percent in the most affected

pockets, remains manageable at the national level given current stock positions, while others caution that the combination of a production shortfall with existing export restrictions on certain commodities could still produce localised price pressure even if national aggregate supply holds up reasonably well.

The Buffer Stock Cushion: Rice and Wheat

The single most important factor distinguishing the current situation from earlier weak-monsoon years is the extraordinary size of India's central grain reserves heading into this kharif season. Government-held rice stocks stood at approximately 73.9 million tonnes as of March 2026, more than five times the mandated buffer stock norm, while wheat stocks of around 22 to 23.6 million tonnes were nearly triple the corresponding buffer requirement. These reserves, built up over consecutive years of strong rabi wheat harvests and sustained procurement, give the government substantial room to release additional grain into the open market at subsidized prices should kharif rice production fall meaningfully short, a mechanism explicitly built to depress open-market prices during exactly this kind of supply shock.

This stock position has already begun to influence trade policy in a direction that might seem counterintuitive during a weak monsoon year rather than tightening wheat export restrictions further, the government has partially relaxed its earlier wheat export ban in 2026, allowing India to re-enter export markets as it works down a historically large surplus. Rice exports for the 2026-27 trade year are similarly projected at a record level, reflecting confidence that current stock levels can support both robust domestic distribution and continued exports even if this season's kharif rice harvest underperforms.

A Different Story for Sugar

Sugar tells a markedly different story from rice and wheat, and illustrates why blanket statements about India restricting all major agricultural exports this season are imprecise. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade formally moved all categories of sugar, raw, white, and refined, from a restricted export category to an outright prohibited category with immediate effect through 30 September 2026. Unlike the cushion available in rice and wheat, India's sugar closing stock for the current season is projected to fall to around 42.5 lakh tonnes by the end of September 2026, the lowest level since 2016-17, though officials note this still represents nearly two months of domestic consumption, generally considered adequate until the new crushing season begins in November.

The reasoning behind the sugar export ban is explicitly forward-looking rather than a response to an immediate shortage. Sugarcane has an unusually long vegetative growth cycle, stretching to eleven or twelve months for the spring-planted crop in northern states and fifteen to eighteen months for certain planting cycles in Maharashtra, meaning that moisture stress during the current El Nino-affected season could constrain cane supply for the 2027-28 sugar year rather than the current one. The government's stated logic is to lock in current surpluses as a multi-year buffer against this longer-horizon risk, compounded by concerns that geopolitical tensions in West Asia could disrupt fertilizer imports and shipping routes on which sugarcane, an unusually water- and input-intensive crop, heavily depends.

The Government's Contingency Playbook

Beyond stock management and trade policy, the government's stated response to the weak start to the season centres on a now-familiar set of tools refined over successive difficult monsoon years: real-time India Meteorological Department advisories pushed directly to farmers to guide last-minute sowing and input decisions, district-level contingency crop plans that specify alternative, less water-intensive crops or shorter-duration varieties farmers can switch to if the primary sowing window closes, expanded seed reserves for these contingency crops, and continued promotion of climate-resilient crop varieties bred specifically to tolerate delayed or deficient rainfall.

This last element connects directly to the broader genomics-driven breeding effort underway across Indian agricultural research institutions, since a season like this one is precisely the real-world test case such breeding programmes are designed for. Whether farmers in the worst-affected eastern districts have meaningful access to short-duration, drought-tolerant rice or coarse cereal varieties this season, rather than only in research station trials, is likely to be one of the more consequential on-the-ground indicators of how far climate-resilient breeding has actually reached smallholder farmers since these programmes began.

Reservoir Levels and the Remainder of the Season

Rainfall deficits this early in the season do not necessarily translate one-to-one into water stress for the remainder of the *kharif* crop cycle, since reservoir storage carried over from the preceding year provides an additional buffer independent of current-season rainfall. Analysts tracking basin-level water availability have noted that reservoir levels, while below the optimal position for this point in the season due to the delayed monsoon onset, remain sufficient to mitigate near-term irrigation risk in several major river basins, particularly where canal-fed irrigation rather than direct rainfall dependency dominates the cropping pattern. This distinction matters most for crops such as rice and sugarcane, which draw more heavily on assured irrigation than on direct monsoon rainfall during the early growth stages, helping explain why sugarcane sowing has held closer to the previous year's pace even as rain-fed rice and pulses have lagged considerably further behind.

The four to six weeks following early July are traditionally regarded as the most consequential window for the *kharif* season's ultimate outcome, since this period determines whether initially delayed sowing can still be completed within a viable crop cycle, or whether farmers in the worst-affected districts will be forced into the lower-yielding contingency crops built into the government's district-level planning. Improved rainfall activity recorded in the first week of July, if sustained through this critical window, could still narrow much of the current sowing deficit before the season's outcome is effectively locked in, a possibility that several market analysts have flagged as the key remaining source of uncertainty in an otherwise well-documented season so far.

India's 2026 Kharif Season: Key Indicators as of Early July

Indicator	2026 Status	Comparison
Cumulative monsoon rainfall (to 6 July)	About 170.7 mm, 20% below LPA	Uneven: East/Northeast -41%, Northwest -19%, Central -5%, South +15%
<i>Kharif</i> area sown (as of early July)	About 35.1 million hectares	Down ~21% from 44.3 million hectares a year earlier
Crops with sharpest acreage decline	Rice, pulses, coarse cereals	Sugarcane, jute, mesta held closer to last year's pace
Government rice stocks (March 2026)	About 73.9 million tonnes	Over 5 times the mandated buffer norm
Government wheat stocks (March 2026)	About 22-23.6 million tonnes	Nearly 3 times the mandated buffer norm
Sugar export policy	Fully prohibited through 30 Sept 2026	Shifted from 'Restricted' to 'Prohibited' category
Wheat and rice export policy	Wheat ban partially relaxed; rice exports at record projected levels	Reflects confidence from large buffer stocks

Conclusion

India's 2026 *kharif* season has opened under real agronomic stress a monsoon running meaningfully behind its long-period average, sowing well below last year's pace, and an El Nino pattern that has historically weakened Indian rainfall exactly at this point in the season. Yet the national food-price story this year looks considerably more contained than the sowing

numbers alone might suggest, because the government is entering this shortfall from a position of unusually large rice and wheat reserves that provide real room to manage domestic supply, in clear contrast to the tighter position facing sugar, where a total export ban reflects a more forward-looking effort to protect a multi-year supply cycle rather than an immediate current-season emergency. The most important number to watch over the remainder of the season is not any single week's rainfall deficit but whether the improving rainfall trend seen in early July holds through the peak sowing window, since a further deterioration would test even India's substantial buffer stocks in a way that has not been necessary in recent years. For rain-fed farmers in the worst-affected eastern and northern districts, meanwhile, the immediate reality remains a narrower planting window, real input-supply strain, and a level of season-to-season uncertainty that no national buffer stock figure can fully offset at the level of an individual field.

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