

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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GS 2: EDUCATION THE HINDU PAGE: 01

Taliban delegation on mission to 'boost agricultural ties with India'

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

The Taliban administration of Afghanistan has expressed desire to enhance agricultural cooperation with India, covering areas such as agricultural trade, infrastructure development, and irrigation, the External Affairs Ministry said on Sunday.

In a statement, the Ministry said the discussions took place during the six-day visit of Attaullah Omari, the Minister for Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock of the Taliban administration. The visit ended on Sunday.

Among the issues discussed were cooperation in food processing through value addition, capacity building and the promotion of bilateral trade in



Afghan Agriculture Minister Mawlawi Attaullah Omari at the meet at PHD House, in Delhi, on Friday. ANI

agricultural and food products.

During the visit, Mr. Omari met Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare and Minister of Rural Development Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Minister of Food Processing Industries Chirag Paswan.

Mr. Omari also met Mi-

nister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margherita.

The Afghan delegation, led by Mr. Omari, also held meetings with the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), the Indian Agricultural Research Institute

(IARI), the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Recognition and aid

India has not yet formally recognised the Taliban administration in Kabul, but has upgraded the 'technical team' in the Indian Embassy in Kabul to the level of *chargé d'affaires*.

India has been sending food, medicines and other essential items to Afghanistan as the country continues to battle a shortage of essential commodities and life-saving medicines.

Much of the assistance was routed through Iran's Chabahar port before the United States-Israel war against Iran disrupted the route.

GS 2: POLITY
THE HINDU PAGE: 06

Minister slams 'interference' by Kerala HC in temple affairs

No freedom for Devaswom Board to take decisions on Sabarimala as HC is giving instructions even on ritual matters, says K. Muraleedharan; he expresses concern over SIT probe into gold theft case

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Devaswom Minister K. Muraleedharan on Sunday slammed the Kerala High Court for "excessive interference" in the affairs of the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple and other temples in the State.

Speaking at a public event, he said the time had come to rethink whether the court should interfere in all such matters, thus limiting the role of the Devaswom Boards and devotees.

Many of the interventions undermined the autonomy of the temples and



K. Muraleedharan expressed concern that the SIT report on the Sabarimala gold theft is yet to be made public. FILE PHOTO

the rights of the believers, he said.

"There is no freedom for the Devaswom Board or the government to take decisions on Sabarimala. The High Court is directly

giving instructions even on ritual matters like which flower to use in temples. It is time for a serious discussion on the extent of the court's intervention in the ritual and administrative

matters of temples," the Minister said.

Mr. Muraleedharan said he had raised the issue in the Assembly. When such opinions were expressed outside the Assembly, he said there was a possibility of contempt of court instead of democratic discussions. Even then, the boards and devotees should stand together, considering the seriousness of the issue. He expressed concern that the report of the Special Investigation Team into the Sabarimala gold theft is yet to see the light of the day. At this rate, the investigation would not be completed anytime soon, he said.

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Five crore Indians wait when the courts take a break

The Supreme Court of India and the major High Courts are on a summer holiday break, i.e., shut down with some vacation Benches functioning to hear urgent matters. However, shops, markets, eating places, government and private offices, hospitals and police stations do not cease to work even though their staff enjoy personal leave. On the other hand, somewhere in an Indian jail tonight, a man who has been convicted of nothing is finishing another year behind bars, his trial still ongoing and perhaps years away from ending. He is one of the roughly three in four prisoners in this country who are undertrials: unconvicted, presumed innocent, yet serving time anyway – often longer than the sentence they would have received had they pleaded guilty. And as you read this, the courts, the public institutions that hold the fate of the poor in their hands, are functioning at only a fraction of their strength.

A three-century backlog

From June 1 to July 12, the Supreme Court is on its summer break, sitting with three or four Benches a week instead of a full court and resuming in earnest on July 13. The doors are not bolted; urgent pleas are still heard. But for six weeks, the most powerful court in the world's most populous democracy idles.

Now hold that against the number it is meant to be fighting. As of the last day of 2025, more than 5.39 crore cases were pending in Indian courts: over 4.76 crore in the district courts, 63.6 lakh in the High Courts, and more than 92,000 in the Supreme Court itself, its heaviest load in over 30 years. A government study once calculated that, at the present pace, clearing the pile could take three centuries.

Three centuries. And the Court takes the summer and winter vacations off.

To be fair, the judges deserve it. The recess is when reserved judgments finally get written, when the brutal daily cause-list eases enough to think.



Vijay L. Kelkar

Vice-Chairman of the Pune International Centre



Pradeep S. Mehta

Secretary-General of CUTS International (Consumer Unity and Trust Society)

When courts rest together for vacations, crores of litigants across the country wait longer for justice

Last year the Chief Justice of India and his four senior-most colleagues worked clean through the first week of the break. Indian judges are among the most overworked in the world. This is not an accusation of laziness; no one who has seen a judge's docket could make one.

Because that is precisely the point. When the people doing the work are exhausted and the backlog is biblical, what conceivable logic shuts the whole shop at once? Not that judges rest – which they should – but that almost all of them rest together, so the institution goes quiet for six-plus weeks every year. And the habit is a colonial hand-me-down: the calendar was built for English judges who could not stand the Indian heat and retreated to cooler climes each summer, then enjoyed long Christmas holidays in the winter.

In 2024, the Court announced a fix: it renamed the “summer vacation” as “partial court working days”. That was it. The number of days it actually sits – about 190 days in a year – did not change. You cannot rebrand your way out of a backlog; a litigant whose case is stuck does not care what the recess is called, only whether his matter is heard and disposed of.

Justice needs court continuity

So what would actually help? The first answer is one the judiciary's own watchdogs have urged for years: do not abolish judicial rest; stagger it. A parliamentary standing committee in 2023 objected to “the entire court going on vacation en masse”, and proposed the obvious: rotate the leave, keep the Benches full, and never let the court run thin. A hospital does not empty its wards because its doctors are owed time off; it builds a roster. The Law Commission and the Justice Malimath Committee said the same, long ago. They were not enemies of the courts; they were trying to save them from themselves.

The standard objection is that all this is a sideshow: the real disease is vacancies, not vacations. It is true that courts are starved of judges, with up to a third of High Court seats

lying empty. But the objection boomerangs. If the Bench is already running at half strength, thinning it further for six weeks every summer is not a defence of the recess; it is the strongest case against it. And while filling those seats depends on the government and the collegium and will drag on for years, the calendar is the judiciary's to fix. One reform needs permission; the other needs only will.

Beyond courts, towards solutions

Staggering the leave, though, only treats the symptom. The deeper fix is to keep disputes out of the courtroom in the first place; it was never meant to be the first stop for every quarrel, but the last. India already has the tools. Lok Adalats settled more than 2.59 crore cases in a single national sitting last December, and over 23.5 crore in three years. The Mediation Act of 2023 now nudges parties to attempt settlement before going to court, and arbitration can take commercial disputes entirely out of judges' hands; yet these routes remain badly underused. But none of this happens on its own.

The country has a reservoir of experience it scarcely draws on: its retired judges, who spent their careers mastering this very machinery and step down, still in full command of it, at 62 or 65. Their expertise need not retire with them. Albeit many of them do function as heads of quasi-judicial bodies and tribunals. Freed from any daily docket, a dedicated corps of former judges could be invited to take up a single targeted charge: identify where cases pile up, set public targets for their disposal, and account for progress openly. Reform that belongs to everyone belongs to no one.

The judges will keep working through the heat, as they always do. The honest demand is not that they stop resting, but that the courts stop closing ranks and falling silent at the same moment, because justice, for five crore Indians, is not on vacation. It is overdue.

With contributions from Amushka Kewani of CUTS

GS 2 & 3: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Why has China banned helium exports?

Why is helium emerging as a strategic resource? How vulnerable is the world to a helium supply shock? Why is it considered a critical input for future technologies? Why is storing and transporting helium so expensive? What makes it so hard to replace?

EXPLAINER

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:
On July 10, the Ministry of Commerce and General Administration of Customs, China, has temporarily but immediately banned helium exports from the country. As of 4.30 pm IST on July 10, Beijing had not published any other information as to why it took this step now or its scope.

Is China a major helium producer?
China imports more than 80% of its helium needs but produces only around 1.6% of the world's helium. The export ban follows an extended period of supply strained by Russia's export restrictions — where the Prime Minister needs to sign off on shipments through 2027 — and supply risks tied to heightened tensions in West Asia.

The world's major helium producers are the U.S. (meeting 43% of total supply), followed by Qatar, Russia, Canada, and Algeria. In 2024, the U.S. privatised its Federal Helium Reserve and, selling its assets to the Messer Group and no longer buffering shocks such as those due to the U.S.-Iran conflict.

The next year, the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform launched an investigation into Messer's Chinese interests, stoking the risk of tit-for-tat measures. Which China's latest export ban could be.

After the U.S., Qatar has been meeting 33% of the demand, especially in Asia. After the conflict with Iran escalated, as medical chemist and *Science* columnist Derek Lowe put it, "one-third of global helium production is now literally bottled up behind the Strait of Hormuz, a much higher percentage than world oil production [where the situation is bad enough already]."

In this light, China's new export restriction could preserve the country's helium supply for its domestic chip



Helium can only be transported in vacuum-jacketed stainless steel vessels that are manufactured only by a few companies worldwide. GETTY IMAGES

manufacturers and its medical sector.

How is helium obtained?

Helium is the second-lightest element, after hydrogen, and is not manufactured. It is a non-renewable resource generated deep in the earth's crust, where the radioactive decay of uranium and thorium atoms emits alpha particles, which capture electrons to form helium atoms.

Over millions of years, this helium migrates into the same reservoirs of natural gas, and they are extracted together. This said, natural gas is not processed to isolate the helium from it until the latter makes up at least 0.3% by volume.

But once it does, the gas is isolated using the fact that it has a different boiling point.

Some operators also recover helium from LNG plants and from the air but these quantities are too low to matter to the global demand. Helium for commercial use is usually at least 99.997% pure.

What is helium used for?

Helium has an extremely low boiling point — negative 269°C — and does not participate easily in chemical reactions. These are good properties for a coolant that needs to cool the magnets in MRI machines, the silicon wafers in the semiconductor fabricating industry, and, increasingly, some of the devices used in quantum computers. Its small atoms mean the gas escapes easily through gaps that might be too small for oxygen or nitrogen atoms — so engineers use helium as a leak-detector.

Helium is also used in the process of drawing optical fibres to rapidly and uniformly cool molten glass and to displace oxygen or nitrogen from forming bubbles inside the material. Spaceflight organisations like ISRO, NASA, and SpaceX use helium to pressurise fuel tanks in rockets. Research and the tourism sector in many parts of the world also use helium to inflate balloons and airships.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, laboratory use-cases account for

22% of the demand for helium, followed by controlled atmospheres and semiconductors (17%), lifting gas (17%), MRI scanners (15%), aerospace (9%), and detecting leaks (5%).

How much does helium cost?

In June 2026, the spot price for highly pure helium in Northeast Asia had reportedly spiked to \$150-205 per thousand cubic feet, almost double what it was in late 2025. At least one major supplier, the U.S.-based industrial supplier Airgas, has invoked force majeure and tacked on surcharges of \$13.50 per hundred cubic feet to existing contracts. Liquid helium is by default expensive to store and transport because helium only liquefies at -269°C.

In fact, the helium supply chain as a whole is cost-intensive because purification, storage, and transport are each expensive and technically sophisticated. A mid- to large-scale purification and liquefaction facility will require more than \$100 million while smaller ones can cost around \$10 million, thanks to the need for corrosion-resistant alloys that can withstand ultra-low temperatures.

The gas can be stored in underground salt caverns, which reduce leaks significantly — but these formations are rare and developing a new one can cost more than \$200 million. It can also be stored as compressed gas or cryogenic liquid. The former typically costs up to \$10 million to build while bulk cryogenic liquid storage systems generally need between \$0.5 million and \$20 million depending on capacity. Then there are the operational expenses.

Finally, helium can only be transported in vacuum-jacketed stainless steel vessels — which are manufactured by relatively few companies worldwide, including several Chinese ones.

Finally, the contractor transporting the containers must also ensure they are delivered before the holding time expires, after which the helium will start boiling off into the atmosphere.

THE GIST

The export ban follows an extended period of supply strained by Russia's export restrictions — where the Prime Minister needs to sign off on shipments through 2027 — and supply risks tied to heightened tensions in West Asia.

Helium is an important coolant in the semiconductor fabricating industry, where it removes heat from silicon wafers.

The helium supply chain as a whole is cost-intensive because purification, storage, and transport are each expensive and technically sophisticated.

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

How DDCs changed local governance in J&K?

What is at stake in the debate over local democracy in Jammu and Kashmir?

Tikender Singh Panwar

The story so far:

The restructuring of Jammu and Kashmir's political and administrative framework through the constitution of District Development Councils (DDCs) has remained the subject of legal and constitutional debate. Formed in 2021, the DDCs completed their five-year term on February 24, 2026. With no fresh elections held and local government institutions remaining largely inactive in recent years, questions have resurfaced about the relevance of the DDC model. Introduced as a mechanism for direct local democracy, the DDCs are viewed by supporters as a step towards grassroots governance, while critics argue they have impeded rather than strengthened democratic decentralisation in the region.

What do the 73rd and 74th Amendments provide for?

One of the core arguments presented for

the abrogation of Article 370 was the need to fully integrate J&K with the constitutional framework applicable to the rest of India.

A central element of this argument was the introduction of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which provide for elected rural and urban bodies. This integration was intended to ensure regular, mandatory elections and empower grassroots democracy.

How is local governance structured?

The standard constitutional framework operates on a clearly defined multi-tier electoral system where citizens directly elect their local representatives:

Urban areas: Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats.

Rural areas: A three-tier structure comprising Gram Panchayats (Village Pradhans), Block Development Councils (BDCs), and District-level bodies (Zila Parishads).

Mandated under Article 243ZD of the

Constitution, the District Planning Committee (DPC) is envisaged as a coordinating body that brings together development plans prepared by panchayats and municipalities and integrates them into a comprehensive district-level plan.

Unlike an independent executive authority, the DPC is intended to function as an institutional mechanism that reflects priorities generated by elected local bodies and facilitates bottom-up planning. In this sense, it is designed to strengthen democratic decentralisation by aggregating local mandates rather than exercising authority over them.

However, while the constitutional framework assigns a key role to DPCs in district-level planning, their functioning has been uneven across the country, with many remaining largely inactive, barring a few exceptions such as Kerala.

How do DDCs differ from DPCs?

The DDCs were established in J&K through an executive order rather than a

legislative process. While the government presents DDCs as directly elected bodies that strengthen grassroots democracy, it is contended that the model contains major contradictions within the governance framework.

Critics argue that the DDC structure bypasses existing institutions such as Zila Panchayats and urban local bodies. Unlike the DPC, which is intended to aggregate development priorities emerging from lower tiers of government, the DDC functions as a parallel administrative authority with executive and developmental powers. This blurs the relationship between the electorate and the actual exercise of power.

The key distinction is that the DPC seeks to strengthen local democracy by consolidating mandates generated from the ground up, whereas the DDC operates from above, competing with lower tiers of governance and functioning as an instrument of centralised bureaucratic control rather than democratic decentralisation.

The DDC structure raises concerns about unequal representation. The allocation of seats across districts does not adequately reflect variations in population, thereby diluting the principle of uniform political weight.

For instance, Srinagar, with a population of roughly 12 lakh, and Kishtwar, with around 2.5 lakh residents, are allocated the same number of DDC members. This creates an imbalance where the political voice per capita is drastically skewed.

The DDCs are being compared to the "special purpose vehicles" used in Smart City projects. They create an illusion of decentralisation, but act as capital-driven, bureaucratically managed structures. Since DDCs can easily jettison legislatively approved local initiatives, they function as a governance substitute rather than a governance supplement.

The creation of 280 DDC members across J&K has established a form of parallel 'parliament' in disguise. Historically, in politically fragile regions, central authorities have often sought to weaken provincial or State-level assemblies by backing district-level entities.

With the J&K State Assembly absent or weakened for years, the DDC framework has allowed key functions and financial powers that would ordinarily rest with elected legislators and local panchayats to remain concentrated under Union administration control.

What is the way forward for local democracy in J&K?

Genuine local democracy cannot be reduced to an administrative or legal exercise; it is fundamentally a political question. True decentralisation requires the restoration of the DPC model envisaged under the 73th and 74th Constitutional Amendments, ensuring financially empowered and grounded local governments accountable to the State's electorate, rather than an administrative architecture serving centralised union control.

GS 1: SOCIETY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 8

Population spectres do harm. Managing demographic change is the challenge

VISIONS OF population explosion or implosion seem to provoke strong passions. Three centuries ago, Malthus argued that population growth would outpace the food supply, leading to famine and disease. Today, the focus seems to have shifted to concerns about underpopulation in India and globally. Elon Musk even claims that population collapse poses a much greater risk than global warming.

This is a strange turnaround. In the 1800s, the world population was a billion, and life expectancy was less than 30 years. Despite the population growing to over 8 billion, Malthus's doomsday predictions have not materialised, and life expectancy now exceeds 70. Are fears of a shrinking workforce equally flimsy? Just as improvements in agriculture and the Green Revolution have continued to feed the world, it seems highly likely that AI and other technological advances will cope with a smaller workforce.

However, the harm to the social fabric from these overblown claims may be incalculable. Discussions of population devolve into debates about childbearing and ultimately centre on women's bodies. Malthus advocated chastity for women to reduce fertility. Modern global discourse emphasises a return to traditional ways of life, controlling access to contraception, and sometimes criminalises abortion. The Indian discourse echoes the global disconnect, with some unique twists, leaving fear and dissension in its wake. Hence, it is important to address some of these fears directly.

First, is India on the verge of depopulation, as a recent article suggests? If we accept the United Nations projections using their medium variant, the Indian population will grow to 1.7 billion and then decline by the end of the 21st century, returning to the present level of about 1.4 billion. However, projections from the Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics (IHME) suggest it will dip below 1 billion. Unfortunately, IHME projections assume that future college graduates will follow the same path to low fertility as current graduates and that increasing education will further reduce fertility. But between 2015-16 and 2019-21, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for women with 12 more years of education held steady at 1.7, while that for women with lower levels of education dropped. A narrowing gap between educated and less-educated women has been observed in many countries, undermining confidence in the IHME methodology.

Second, with an ageing population, will India face a worker shortage? Projections from the Population Foundation of India indicate that the share of the population aged 60 and older will rise from 11 per cent to 28 per cent between 2021 and 2051. However, this will be offset by a decline in the child population, and the working-age population will decline only slightly from 66 per cent to 64 per cent. With an AI-led increase in productivity and the potential to recruit women workers



SONALDE DESAI

Discussions of population devolve into debates about childbearing and ultimately centre on women's bodies. Modern global discourse emphasises a return to traditional ways of life

who are largely outside the formal labour force, even this slight decline should pose no problem.

Third, is the population in north India growing faster than that in south India, and if so, will it diminish the power of southern states in the Indian Union? South India experienced a fertility decline earlier than the north. For example, in 1971, Tamil Nadu accounted for 7.5 per cent of India's population; by 2011, it had dropped to 6 per cent, and it is likely to have declined further by 2026. Consequently, if electoral seat allocation is based on population share in 2026 rather than 1971, the southern states will lose. But it is also important to remember that higher economic growth, driven by low population growth and increased investment in children, has increased productivity in states like Tamil Nadu. Sanjeev Sanyal estimates that Tamil Nadu's share of GDP grew from 7.1 per cent in the 1990s to 8.9 per cent in 2023-24. Balancing economic and demographic power and ensuring adequate representation of geographic minorities is a challenge that will need to be addressed in the coming years.

Fourth, is the Muslim population in India likely to overtake the Hindu population? Muslim fertility is slightly higher than Hindu fertility, but across the three waves of the National Family Health Survey between 2005 and 2021, both communities have seen a similar decline in TFR of about 0.7, leaving the Hindu-Muslim

fertility gap unchanged. Rudimentary calculations suggest that even after 50 years, this fertility differential, if unchanged, would result in a small increase in the share of the Muslim population in India from about 15 per cent to 19 per cent. It seems more likely that Muslim fertility will follow a path similar to that of Hindus, and the increase will be smaller.

The above discussion suggests the need for a cautious, balanced approach to adapting to population change and for avoiding aggressive rhetoric that does more harm than good. Consider the discourse on declining fertility, which has led to political calls for a return to traditional values and for prioritising contraception and child bonuses.

India stands in stark contrast to countries like Japan. Faced with an inflexible gender culture and work-family constraints, nearly 30 per cent of Japanese women remain unmarried into their 30s. In contrast, marriage and family remain the linchpin of Indian family life. The NFHS shows that 97 per cent of women are married by age 30. Yet the very importance of family also leads to smaller families. My research with Alaka Basu shows that parents often choose to have a single child so they can invest more in that child's education. Reducing educational costs, improving the quality of education, and easing the burden on parents to supervise homework may do more to increase fertility than a call for higher fertility.

The writer is professor, University of Maryland, and NCAER. Views are personal.

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 8

Price of water is not about economics, but justice



GURUDAS
NULKAR

THE MOODY'S water management ratings, published in June, place India in the highest water-risk category. With 18 per cent of the world population, India has access to only about 4 per cent of global freshwater resources. In 2024, the Ministry of Jal Shakti announced that India's per capita freshwater availability is shrinking over the decades. Urban demand, driven by population growth, commercial expansion, and changing lifestyles, continues to outpace supply. Yet one of the most powerful levers for influencing water reuse sits neglected: The water tariff. The low price of water in Indian cities is disconnected from the true cost of supply. At the Centre for Sustainable Development, with the Pune International Centre and Pune Knowledge Cluster, we studied the economics of urban water. The Jal Mulya project delved into the costs and prices of urban water supply and examined consumers' willingness to pay for assured quality of drinking water. The results emphasise the role of tariffs in regulating water use.

Consider this paradox: Grey water, or domestic wastewater from washing, bathing, and kitchen use, can be treated and re-used for toilet flushing, construction, gardening and other non-potable applications. However, freshwater is priced much less when compared to the cost of treating grey water. Why would someone invest in grey-water plumbing and recycling when fresh water is cheap?

Our research corroborates what is already known — water tariffs in cities are set, not on the basis of actual costs of abstraction, treatment, storage and distribution of good-quality water, but on the basis of what is politically tolerable. Part of the problem is ignorance, both among the public and the urban local bodies (ULB). Few, if any, ULBs undertake a full-cost accounting of their water operations. Non-revenue water (NRW), that is treated and supplied but lost to leakage or theft, routinely exceeds 30 per cent of total supply in many cities. This is water that has been paid for in terms of energy, chemicals, and infrastructure, but generates no revenue. When NRW remains invisible in accounts, there is no incentive to address it. A conversation about rational water pricing is nearly impossible because of the lack of

credible data.

Our study refuted a recurring argument: Raising water tariffs will face consumer resistance. Consumers are willing to pay more for water, provided they are assured of its quality. This is not surprising. Those who buy bottled water for their homes and restaurants already show a willingness to pay more for assured quality. But in many cities, urban water utilities have forfeited the trust of their consumers by failing to deliver potable water on tap. The low tariff and the poor quality are mutually reinforcing: ULBs cannot raise the tariff without improving the service, and vice versa. As a result, households and offices resort to domestic water purifiers. Citizens end up paying twice: Through water tariffs and in the purchase and maintenance of equipment.

But this cost is not borne equally. Our research showed that the lower economic classes either consume from the tap, risking their health, or spend a disproportionate part of their income in buying water. Moreover, we noted that higher-income groups consume substantially more water than lower-income households.

Urban India turns nearly 80 per cent of its daily water into sewage. A rational water economy would treat grey water as an asset: Collect it separately, treat it to appropriate standards, and price it for non-potable uses that reflect its cost and value. This has a double effect of lowering freshwater demand and reducing the sewage that is released. But for grey water markets to be viable, freshwater pricing must be rational.

ULBs must undertake and publish full-cost accounting of their water operations, so that the embedded subsidy is visible and accountable. Equity goals must underpin tariff structures. Lifeline quantities per capita have to remain subsidised for all, while progressive pricing should discourage frivolous consumption.

A monsoon-based country like India cannot overcome water stress without getting the price of water right. The opportunity to build a circular urban water economy is here already. The price of water is not an economic question. In a water-scarce country, it is a question of justice.

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Freshwater is priced much less when compared to the cost of treating grey water. Why would someone invest in grey-water plumbing and recycling when fresh water is cheap?