

EDITORIALS - 23RD SEP 2026

1. Water wealth (GS Paper III Environment)

This editorial ‘**Water wealth**’ was published in **The Hindu** on 23rd Sep 2026, highlights how **Punjab’s groundwater depletion** deepens **inequality** among farmers.

Groundwater stress and unequal impacts

- Punjab’s **groundwater extraction** reached **152%** in 2025–26; despite five fewer over-exploited blocks across the last two assessments, 72% of its 153 blocks remain in the red zone.
- Rice and wheat irrigation consumes nearly **25 billion cubic metres** annually; the share of wells deeper than **40 metres** rose by two percentage points from 2022 to 2025.
- Assured procurement, subsidised power and groundwater access entrenched **rice–wheat cultivation**; uncertain prices, storage, processing and supply chains deter **crop diversification**.
- **Small farmers** use water more efficiently but often cannot afford deeper wells; buying water from larger landowners transfers income and creates **dependency**.
- In Sangrur and Barnala, larger farms earned higher returns despite lower **groundwater productivity** in paddy; falling water tables raise irrigation costs and favour farmers with better **credit access**.

Policy response

- Efficiency gains alone cannot offset demand; the State should protect **farm incomes** while making additional **groundwater extraction** prohibitively costly.
- **Pani Bachao, Paisa Kamao** pays farmers for pumping electricity saved below a threshold, though enrolment remains low; subsidy support could also favour smallholders, collective irrigation and alternative crops.

- Subsidised water access should follow the **cultivator**, including tenants, rather than the owner of land or pumps.

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Virtual water in agricultural exports

- **Embedded water:** NITI Aayog estimated that exporting about 37 lakh tonnes of basmati rice in 2014–15 also exported over **10 trillion litres of virtual water** used in its production.
- **Regional burden:** APEDA identifies Punjab among India's basmati-growing regions; rice exports from water-stressed areas can shift groundwater costs onto the producing region.
- **Export value:** APEDA valued India's basmati exports at **US\$5.94 billion in 2024–25**, showing why water use must be assessed alongside export earnings.
- **Crop choice:** NITI Aayog notes that the water embedded in exported basmati could grow larger quantities of less water-intensive crops, such as wheat or millet.
- **Varietal choice:** ICAR reports that **Pusa Basmati 1509** matures earlier and saves irrigation water, illustrating how crop varieties can reduce the footprint of an export crop.
- **Local alternatives:** ICAR has discussed **maize cultivation in Punjab and Haryana** as a less water-intensive alternative to rice, linking crop planning to regional water availability.
- **Policy measure:** NITI Aayog's virtual-water estimate shows why agricultural trade assessments should account for water consumed in producing districts, not export value alone.

2. Using trade treaty policy to strengthen arbitration (GS Paper II Governance)

This editorial 'Using trade treaty policy to strengthen arbitration' was published in **The Hindu** on 23rd Sep 2026, highlights how India's **trade and investment treaties** can strengthen domestic **commercial arbitration**.

Treaty opportunity

- India's expanding **BIT** and **FTA** network can build a predictable, enforceable dispute-resolution system alongside attracting investment and opening markets.
- The **Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996** already covers domestic and international commercial arbitration and enforcement of foreign awards; **treaty policy** can reinforce this framework.

Clarifying access to arbitration

- Future **FTAs** should clarify that omitting investor–state dispute settlement (**ISDS**) does not remove commercial arbitration remedies for investment contracts.
- Future **BITs** should distinguish treaty claims from contractual disputes: the India–Uzbekistan BIT excludes contract-only breaches from ISDS, leaving **commercial arbitration** available.
- BIT rules requiring investors to exhaust **local remedies** could allow Indian commercial arbitration to satisfy that requirement, rather than excluding arbitration tribunals from it.
- Restrictions on **third-party funding** in ISDS should not imply a ban in domestic commercial arbitration, where distinct rules could support India's **arbitration ecosystem**.

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Access to arbitration for MSMEs

- **Payment protection:** Under the **MSMED Act, 2006**, an agreed payment period for a micro or small supplier cannot exceed **45 days**, limiting the time its working capital remains unpaid.

- **Cost of delay:** The Act makes a defaulting buyer liable for **compound interest at three times the RBI bank rate**, giving small suppliers a statutory claim beyond the invoice amount.
- **Dispute forum:** A micro or small supplier can approach a **Micro and Small Enterprises Facilitation Council**; if conciliation fails, the Council may arbitrate or refer the dispute to an arbitration institution.
- **Time limit:** **Section 18** requires a reference to be decided within **90 days**, reflecting the particular harm that prolonged payment disputes cause smaller enterprises.
- **Buyer challenge:** Under **Section 19**, a buyer challenging a Council award must deposit **75% of the awarded amount**, reducing the scope for an appeal to delay payment without financial consequence.
- **Digital access:** The Ministry of MSME's **ODR portal** provides an online route for delayed-payment disputes, which can reduce the need for small suppliers to travel for proceedings.
- **Cross-state claims:** A Council may hear a dispute involving a supplier within its jurisdiction and a buyer **anywhere in India**, an important safeguard for small firms selling across State borders.

3. Breakdown of civic infra in India (GS Paper II Governance)

This editorial '**Breakdown of civic infra in India**' was published in **The Hindu** on 23rd Sep 2026, highlights how **weak enforcement** and **unequal accountability** make civic **infrastructure failures** deadly.

Systemic failures and accountability

- Fatal incidents involving Mumbai's illegal billboard and Delhi's collapsing buildings reflect **systemic failure**, bureaucratic connivance and weak **enforcement**, compounded by public disregard for rules.
- Arrests, suspensions, compensation and promised inquiries follow such deaths, but the recurring pattern persists without **individual accountability**;

officials who approve or knowingly ignore illegal structures should face consequences equal to their owners.

- In Delhi, **unauthorised colonies** evade planning approvals, while owners also encroach on public land; selective **anti-encroachment drives** leave influential violators largely untouched.

Compliance and public scrutiny

- A 2025 Goa bar fire, worsened by indoor fireworks, crowding and limited exits, illustrates the cost of **safety violations**; continued patronage of the owners' other outlets weakens **consumer accountability**.
- Publicly displayed **compliance certificates** and a registry of violations would help consumers make informed choices and strengthen scrutiny of establishments.
- The immediate closures used for breaches of **COVID-19 operating rules** show that consistent monitoring and enforcement of building guidelines are possible.

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Urban disaster preparedness

- **Evacuation failure:** In the **1997 Uphaar cinema fire**, locked exits, smoke-filled stairs and failed exit signs impeded escape; the Supreme Court recorded **59 deaths**.
- **Vulnerable occupants:** The **2024 Jhansi medical college NICU fire**, in which at least ten newborns died, illustrates why facilities housing people unable to evacuate independently need specific rescue plans.
- **Electrical readiness:** A **Health Ministry–NDMA advisory** calls for regular hospital electrical-load audits, particularly when new equipment is installed or spaces are converted into ICUs.

- **Equipment checks:** The same advisory calls for functional **alarms, extinguishers and hydrants**; equipment present on paper offers little protection if it fails during a fire.
- **High-risk spaces:** The advisory identifies **oxygen safety** and sprinklers in critical areas, including ICUs and operating theatres, as measures requiring particular attention.
- **Practised evacuation:** Hospitals are advised to conduct **fire drills** and maintain evacuation procedures so staff can guide patients and visitors during an emergency.
- **Coordinated response:** The Health Ministry asked **State Health Departments and Disaster Management Authorities** to work together on hospital fire safety, connecting facility plans with wider emergency response.