

Daily Editorial Analysis 3 February 2026

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Wetlands as a National Public Good

Context

- World Wetlands Day 2026, observed under the theme Wetlands and traditional knowledge: Celebrating cultural heritage, draws attention to the deep connections between people and **Wetlands** in India.
- For centuries, communities have depended on water bodies not only for survival but also for culture, identity, and collective wellbeing.
- These landscapes represent a convergence of ecology and society, where **Traditional Knowledge** has shaped sustainable interactions with nature.
- Yet, despite their value, wetlands today face accelerating decline, raising urgent questions about how **Heritage** and modern governance can be aligned to secure their future.

Traditional Knowledge and the Cultural Ecology of Wetlands

- Across India, wetlands have historically supported **Livelihoods** through locally adapted practices that balanced use and protection.
- In Tamil Nadu, interconnected tanks or kulams regulated water for agriculture, while in Kerala, kenis ensured drinking water and ritual continuity.
- Fishing communities in Andhra Pradesh developed seasonal practices that sustained both people and **Ecosystems**.
- These systems were governed collectively and refined over generations, embedding conservation within daily life.
- Such examples reveal wetlands as socio-ecological systems rather than vacant land.
- They demonstrate that cultural memory and local practices can inform present-day approaches to **Conservation**, especially when communities remain active stewards rather than passive beneficiaries.

Policy Frameworks and the Crisis of Implementation

- India possesses an extensive **Policy** architecture for wetland protection, including the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, the National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Ecosystems, the Coastal Regulation Zone framework, and Ramsar commitments.
- Together, these address a wide range of wetland types and ecological contexts.
- However, the central challenge lies in **Implementation**. Large proportions of wetlands have disappeared in recent decades, while many remaining sites show severe **Degradation**.

- Delays in notification, weak enforcement, fragmented institutional roles, and poor coordination undermine the effectiveness of existing laws.
- International recognition through Ramsar designation carries responsibility, but protection on paper often fails to translate into action on the ground.

Development Pressures and Ecological Degradation

- Wetlands are especially vulnerable because they lie at the intersection of land, water, and development.
- Rapid **Urbanisation**, infrastructure expansion, and land conversion have erased or fragmented many natural systems.
- Alterations to water flow, through dams, embankments, sand mining, and groundwater extraction, disrupt wetland **Hydrology**, weakening their ecological functions.
- **Pollution** compounds these pressures. Untreated sewage, industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, and solid waste trigger eutrophication, biodiversity loss, and declining water quality.
- Urban wetlands are often expected to absorb floods, manage waste, and remain biodiverse, despite lacking legal buffers or adequate protection.
- In coastal regions, rising seas and extreme weather linked to **Climate** change intensify risks, trapping **Mangroves** and lagoons between development and erosion.

Institutional Capacity and Governance Gaps

- Beyond environmental stressors, limited **Capacity** within institutions remains a major obstacle.
- State wetland authorities are frequently understaffed and underfunded, with gaps in technical expertise, enforcement, and community engagement.
- Weak planning and monitoring reflect broader challenges in **Governance**, where multiple mandates compete without effective coordination.
- Without skilled personnel and clear accountability, even well-designed frameworks struggle to deliver results.

Towards Pragmatic, Integrated Solutions

- Addressing these challenges requires a shift from isolated projects to long-term programmes, and from cosmetic interventions to ecological **Restoration**.
- Clear notification and demarcation of wetlands, supported by transparent mapping and participatory verification, form the foundation of protection.
- Urban and peri-urban wetlands require strict control of inflows; wetlands cannot replace sewage treatment plants.
- At the landscape scale, protecting **Catchments** and restoring hydrological **Connectivity** are essential to maintaining wetland functions.
- Coastal and riparian wetlands should be treated as natural **Infrastructure** for disaster risk reduction, offering protection comparable to engineered systems.
- Equally important is sustained investment in training and institutions, linking wetland management outcomes to tangible benefits for local people and fostering long-term stewardship.

Conclusion

- The future of India's wetlands depends on collective responsibility and governments must enforce and coordinate.
- Cities must abandon the notion of wetlands as wastelands, industries must prevent pollution at source, and educational institutions must train skilled practitioners.
- Citizens, too, play a crucial role in defending local water bodies as shared assets.
- By aligning science with policy and grounding both in the experience of **Communities**, wetlands can be restored as living systems that support **Resilience** and **Sustainability**.
- In doing so, India safeguards not only its water and biodiversity, but also a vital foundation for social and ecological stability.

Wetlands as a National Public Good FAQs

Q1. Why are wetlands culturally significant in India?

Ans. Wetlands are culturally significant because communities have historically relied on them for livelihoods, rituals, and collective wellbeing through traditional practices.

Q2. What is the main weakness in India's wetland conservation efforts?

Ans. The main weakness is poor implementation and coordination of existing laws and policies.

Q3. How does urban development threaten wetlands?

Ans. Urban development threatens wetlands through land conversion, disrupted hydrology, and increased pollution.

Q4. Why are wetlands important for disaster risk reduction?

Ans. Wetlands act as natural infrastructure by absorbing floods, reducing storm impacts, and protecting coastlines.

Q5. What is essential for effective wetland governance in India?

Ans. Effective wetland governance requires strong institutional capacity, scientific management, and community participation.

Source: **The Hindu**

Visible Progress, Invisible Exclusion

Context

- India's Union Budget 2026-27 signals a decisive shift away from pandemic-era crisis management towards a borrowing-led development strategy anchored in public **capex**.
- By targeting a **fiscal deficit** of 4.3% of GDP and expanding public investment to ₹12.2 lakh crore, the government positions **infrastructure** spending as the central driver of long-term **growth**.
- This approach reflects confidence in India's macroeconomic stability and reframes public investment and MSME support as permanent pillars rather than temporary stimulus.

- Yet, beneath this stability lies a growing tension between capital formation and **employment**

Towards a Growth Doctrine

- For much of India's post-independence history, capital expenditure expanded or contracted based on revenue conditions.
- That framework changed after 2020–21, when capex became the organising principle of fiscal policy.
- Its share in total expenditure rose from about 12% to over 22%, reflecting a strategic commitment to public investment-led expansion.
- The logic is familiar: public spending crowds in private investment, raises **productivity**, and generates jobs.
- However, labour indicators suggest that this transmission is weakening. Youth **NEET** rates (ages 15–29) remain between 23% and 25%, indicating that a significant share of young Indians remains outside education, employment, or training even as investment accelerates.
- Growth, while strong on aggregate, is no longer translating automatically into broad-based **labour** market participation.

A Structural U-Turn

- Sectoral employment trends reveal a deeper structural reversal. **Construction**, the sector most directly linked to infrastructure spending, has seen declining job intensity.
- Its employment **elasticity** fell from 0.59 in the pre-COVID period (2011–12 to 2019–20) to 0.42 in the post-COVID years (2021–22 to 2023–24).
- Record infrastructure spending is now associated with fewer jobs per unit of investment than in the past.
- The shift in **agriculture** is even more concerning. Instead of releasing labour as productivity rises elsewhere, the sector has begun reabsorbing workers.
- Employment elasticity jumped from 0.04 before COVID to 1.51 after, indicating distress-driven fallback into low-productivity activity.
- Together, these trends represent a structural U-turn: India is modernising its physical assets while its workforce drifts back toward subsistence.

Capital Intensity and Wage Divergence

- The employment shortfall is closely tied to the production structure reinforced by the capex turn. Public investment increasingly favours **capital-intensive**
- While net value added per worker has risen, **wages** have lagged, creating a widening gap between productivity gains and labour income.
- These gains are largely captured as **profits**, rather than shared with workers.
- Industrial composition reinforces this bias. Most factories remain small and contribute modestly to output, while larger firms, better positioned to exploit new logistics and infrastructure, dominate value creation but generate limited employment.
- **MSMEs**, particularly in **manufacturing**, struggle to scale, compete, or integrate into capital-heavy supply chains.

- The outcome is a **dual economy**: a high-productivity, capital-driven upper tier that fuels headline GDP growth, and a vast lower tier that absorbs workers through **informality**, self-employment, and low-wage activity with weak income growth.

Conclusion

- Fiscal strategy and labour outcomes together suggest a reordering of priorities. Employment is increasingly treated as an indirect outcome of growth rather than a co-equal objective.
- Inclusion in the growth process depends on formal **skills**, urban location, and compatibility with **automation**.
- Those outside this profile adjust downward into informal or subsistence work. Even within the organised sector, wage growth remains muted.
- The economy continues to expand, but without broad **absorption** of labour. The central challenge ahead is not sustaining growth alone, but reshaping it to reduce **inequality** and reconnect capital accumulation with employment creation.

Visible Progress, Invisible Exclusion FAQs

Q1. What is the central shift in India's Budget 2026-27 strategy?

Ans. The budget marks a transition to a borrowing-led, capital expenditure-driven growth model.

Q2. Why is the current capex-led growth model concerning for employment?

Ans. Because rising capital investment is no longer translating into proportional job creation.

Q3. What does the change in construction employment elasticity indicate?

Ans. It shows that infrastructure spending is generating fewer jobs than it did earlier.

Q4. Why is rising agricultural employment considered problematic?

Ans. It reflects distress-driven fallback into low-productivity work rather than structural transformation.

Q5. How does the analysis describe India's emerging economic structure?

Ans. It depicts a dual economy where capital-intensive growth coexists with widespread informal labour absorption.

Source: **The Hindu**

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