Building water security - Groundwater conservation

What is the issue?

A key focus of water security in India has to be rational groundwater use, replenishment and conservation.

How is the present groundwater usage scenario?

- Groundwater Resource Estimation Committee's report (from 2015) - 1,071 out of 6,607 blocks in the country are over-exploited.
- This is likely to have worsened over the years.
- India's groundwater usage exceeds that of China and the US combined.
- More than a third of the country's population lives in water-stressed areas, and this number is expected to shoot up.
- Per capita water availability in the country had fallen to just under a third of 1950 levels by 2011; projected to fall to a fourth in the next 20 years.

What are the key factors for the decline?

- Rising population
- Increasing unsustainable use of groundwater
- Rapid rise in tubewell-irrigation
- Increase in the acreage under water-guzzling crops like sugarcane and paddy due to flawed policies like MSP-led public procurement and government fixing cane prices

  Agriculture accounts for 78% of all freshwater used annually in the country; 64% of this coming from groundwater.

What are the present policy shortfalls?

- The Atal Bahujal Yojana (ABY), by the Jal Shakti Ministry, is the flagship conservation programme.
- But the model proposed could take decades to get implemented across the country, but there is a need for immediate results.
- The expenditure against the targets under the scheme, as also the release of funds, has been alarmingly low for the past as well as the present year.

What are the favourable policies?

National Water Policy 2020

- Contains specific strategies and deadlines

- Gives the highest priority to groundwater governance and management through a Participatory Groundwater Management (PGWM) approach

2018 PM-AASHA (Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan)

- Proposes up to 40% procurement of crops that are not as water-intensive (millets, nutri-cereals) if these are successfully integrated into the PDS

What is to be done?

- Stop encouraging cultivation of water-intensive crops (via MSP-led procurement, SAP/FRPs).
- Take up crop diversification
- Attention to pricing of water, and timely data on usage/availability/depletion, etc.
- Centre and the states must act rapidly on groundwater conservation if Jal Se Jeevan and other flagship water-access programmes are to be a success.

Source: Financial Express

