Ground Water Crisis

Why is the issue?

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A new regulatory regime for groundwater that provides for equitable use is urgently needed.

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What is the present scenario?

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- India is facing a severe water crisis that requires immediate attention.
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- The primary source of domestic water and irrigation is groundwater but the media and policymakers often focus on surface water.
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- Water tables have been falling rapidly in many parts of the country, indicating that, use generally exceeds replenishment.
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- Indeed, the quality of the water pumped is also increasingly becoming cause for concern
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How has groundwater use evolved in India?

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- In the mid-19th century the British administration decided that the easiest way to regulate groundwater was to give landowners a set of rules on what amounts to proper use.
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- Over the following decades, landowners started seeing groundwater as their own, a resource they can exploit without considering the need to protect and replenish.
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- Access to a source of groundwater has progressively become a source of power and economic gain.
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- The latter has become increasingly visible in recent decades with the increase of mechanical pumps, which allows big landowners to sell water to others.
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- This has become a menace as the immediate consequences of over-exploition is not felt.
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What are the steps taken by the union government in this regard?

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- The Union government recognised the need to modernise the regulatory framework for accessing groundwater soon after massive expansion in mechanical pumping.
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- In the early 1970s a model Bill was first introduced, which focussed on adding some State-level control over grounderwater use, but did not take away the unlimited access that the landowners enjoyed.
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- This was only taken up by around a dozen States from the late 1990s onwards, whereas the others are yet to address this issue.
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- In addition, there is no provision in the existing legal regime to protect and conserve groundwater at the aquifer level.
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- Further, the present framework remains mostly top-down and fails to give gram sabhas and panchayats a prevailing say in the regulation of what is essentially a local resource.
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- The failure of the present legal regime has been officially recognised since at least the beginning of this decade, by the erstwhile planning commission & the Ministry of water resources.
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- As a result, the Groundwater (Sustainable Management) Bill, 2017 was introduced.
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What are the highlights of the ‘Groundwater Bill, 2017’?

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- The bill proposes a new regulatory framework based on the recognition of the unitary nature of groundwater pool, the need for decentralised control and the necessity to protect water at the aquifer level.
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- It recognition water as a public trust and a fundamental right.
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- The Bill also builds on the decentralisation mandate and seeks to give regulatory control over groundwater resources to local bodies.
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- The proposed new regime will benefit the resource, through the introduction of groundwater security plans and valuable local participation.
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- This will serve as a mandate to use groundwater wisely, protect it for our own benefit, as well as for future generations.
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Source: The Hindu

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