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MAGAZINE NOTES

Groundwater Depletion & the Hidden Labour Crisis

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ENVIRONMENT

ECONOMY

SOCIAL ISSUES

GEOGRAPHY

GS1

GS3

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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Groundwater Depletion & the Hidden Labour Crisis

 **Down to Earth** Chapter 4 · 1 min read

WHY IN NEWS

The CGWB's Dynamic Ground Water Resources of India 2024 report reveals that 11% of India's groundwater blocks are over-exploited, triggering a severe collapse in casual agricultural employment.

CGWB 2024 Report Data

PARAMETER	VALUE
Annual recharge	448.5 bcm
Extractable resource	407.8 bcm
Current extraction	247.2 bcm
Over-exploited units (2023)	736 of 6,553 (11%)

The "Invisible Employer" Mechanism

- Groundwater is the **invisible employer** — it enables multiple cropping seasons, generating millions of days of casual agricultural labour
- ~1 in 4 rural workers are casual agricultural labourers (2022-23 PLFS)
- Falling water tables reduce transplanting and weeding seasons → fewer hiring days → out-migration → underemployment → wage decline
- Women disproportionately affected** — limited non-farm alternatives in rural areas

Root Cause

- Untargeted, unmetered **electricity subsidies** incentivise over-pumping
- No link between groundwater status and employment planning

Solutions Proposed

- Atal Bhujal Yojana:** Community-led monitoring, recharge structures, IoT piezometers
- Replace blanket power subsidies with **metered electricity + direct cash transfers** for smallholders
- Job-linked recharge works through state rural employment programmes

- **Auto-expand safety nets** when blocks turn “critical” status

UPSC Angle

- **GS3:** Water resources, agriculture, employment
- **GS1:** Social issues, migration, women’s vulnerability



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