

Governed Invisibility: Floods, Environmental Inequality, and the Reproduction of Caste in Pakistan

Ghulam Hussain and Naveed Ahmed Lashari*

Abstract

Climate change intensifies historically entrenched inequalities, yet less attention has been paid to how environmental governance itself reproduces those inequalities through the bureaucratic practices by which vulnerability is recognised and governed. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic research (2019–2025) among Dalit and Pasmenda communities in Sindh, Pakistan, alongside analysis of government reports, disaster assessments, and humanitarian documents, this article examines how caste structures environmental vulnerability while remaining largely invisible within disaster governance. Building on scholarship on eco-casteism, Dalit ecologies, and caste-based environmental justice, it shifts attention from the production of environmental inequality to the institutional processes through which caste disappears from the categories of governance. To explain this paradox, the article develops the concept of governed invisibility and argues that environmental governance operates through four overlapping regimes of political legibility: Sindhi nationalist

*Dr Ghulam Hussain is an anthropologist and Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Georg Forster Research Fellow at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU). He is also Assistant Professor of Applied Anthropology at Bahria University, Islamabad. He is the author of *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan: Dalit Assertions in a Culture of Denial* (Routledge, 2026) and *Secular Sufism and the Politics of Difference* (Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming). Naveed Ahmed Lashari has done Masters in Anthropology from Quaid I Azam University and is a Monitoring and Evaluation specialist with extensive experience in programme management, research, community development, and humanitarian and development interventions in Sindh, Pakistan. At HANDS International, he has served in several programme and management roles, including as Monitoring & Evaluation Specialist for the USAID Water Governance for Sindh programme and the Sindh Flood Emergency Housing Reconstruction Project.

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political Sufism, state-driven political Islam, humanitarian-development governance, and local feudal-caste authority. Together, these regimes render caste administratively invisible while continuing to shape unequal access to land, relief, reconstruction, and state resources. Extending debates on caste and environmental justice to Pakistan, the article demonstrates how religious formations and disaster governance reproduce caste-structured environmental inequalities through apparently universal bureaucratic categories of vulnerability, humanitarianism, and resilience.

Keywords: Environmental governance; Disaster governance; Critical Caste Studies; Eco-casteism; Dalit ecologies; Humanitarian governance; Governed invisibility; Pakistan

1. *Introduction*

The devastating floods that engulfed Sindh in 2022 were among the most destructive climate disasters in Pakistan's history. Triggered by unprecedented monsoon rainfall beginning in late June, they affected more than 12.3 million people, displaced over 7.3 million residents, destroyed or damaged more than two million houses, inundated approximately 3.8 million acres of cropland, and devastated roads, irrigation systems, and public infrastructure across the province.¹ Northern Sindh experienced some of the heaviest rainfall ever recorded. Larkana

¹ Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) Sindh, *Flood 2022 in Sindh: From 24 June 2022 to 31 March 2023* (Rehabilitation Department, Government of Sindh 2023) <<https://pdma.gos.pk/Documents/Reports/Flood%202022%20In%20Sindh.pdf>> accessed 24 July 2026; Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Floods 2022: Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA): Main Report* (Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives 2022) <<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/4a0114eb7d1cecbbf2f65c5ce0789db-0310012022/original/Pakistan-Floods-2022-PDNA-Main-Report.pdf>> accessed 24 July 2026; National Disaster Management Authority, *Pakistan Monsoon Floods 2022: Situation Report, 29 August 2022* (ReliefWeb 2022) <<https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-monsoon-floods-2022-29-august-2022>> accessed 6 June 2025; J S Nanditha, Anuj Prakash Kushwaha, Rajesh Singh, Iqura Malik, Hiren Solanki, Dipesh Singh Chuphal, Swarup Dangar, Shanti Shwarup Mahto, Urmin Vegad and Vimal Mishra, 'The Pakistan Flood of August 2022: Causes and Implications' (2023) 11(3) *Earth's Future* e2022EF003230; Asifa Iqbal, Humaira Nazir and Nighat Khurshid, 'Exploring the Effects of Floods in Pakistan: Pre/Post Flood Analysis 2022' (2024) 115 *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 105032.

District, where we conducted ethnographic fieldwork, received 893.4 mm of rainfall, while nearby Padian recorded 1,763 mm, making it one of the worst-affected localities in the province.² As floodwaters remained trapped for months behind breached embankments and overloaded drainage systems, what began as an extreme climatic event evolved into a prolonged crisis of environmental governance. Following David Benson and Andrew Jordan, Jouni Paavola, and Michael Barnett, we distinguish environmental governance—the broader assemblage of institutions responsible for climate adaptation, water management, disaster risk reduction, and reconstruction—from humanitarian governance, which refers more specifically to emergency relief and post-disaster recovery.³

Yet the floods exposed more than an environmental catastrophe. They revealed how environmental governance is structured by historically produced inequalities that shape who becomes most exposed to environmental hazards, who receives humanitarian assistance, and who recovers. These dynamics became evident during ethnographic fieldwork across flood-affected districts of Sindh.⁴ Six months after the monsoon, many settlements remained surrounded by stagnant water as damaged drainage systems failed to recover. Houses had collapsed, livestock had perished, and food insecurity persisted long after emergency relief had ended. Yet residents consistently described their greatest hardship not as the flood itself but as the unequal distribution of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction support. Relief, compensation, and recovery were routinely mediated through entrenched local power structures, leaving many marginalized communities to receive aid last—or to be excluded altogether. Ethnographic fieldwork consistently demonstrated that environmental disasters did not create inequality; they exposed and intensified longstanding caste hierarchies that determined who became visible, recognised, and supported in times of crisis.

² JS Nanditha and others, 'The Pakistan Flood of August 2022: Causes and Implications' (2023) 11(3) *Earth's Future* e2022EF003230; Asifa Iqbal, Humaira Nazir and Nighat Khurshid, 'Exploring the Effects of Floods in Pakistan: Pre/Post Flood Analysis 2022' (2024) 115 *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 105032; PDMA (n 1).

³ David Benson and Andrew Jordan, 'Environmental Governance' in Douglas Richardson and others (eds), *The International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology* (Wiley-Blackwell 2017); Jouni Paavola, 'Institutions and Environmental Governance: A Reconceptualization' (2007) 63(1) *Ecological Economics* 93; Michael N Barnett, 'Humanitarian Governance' (2013) 16 *Annual Review of Political Science* 379; Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* (Duke University Press 2005).

⁴ See Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) Sindh, *Flood 2022 in Sindh*.

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Across Pakistan, caste has long structured access to land, labour, ecological resources, public infrastructure, and political authority.⁵ Dalit and Pasmanda⁶ communities are disproportionately concentrated in environmentally fragile landscapes, including drainage basins, riverine settlements, and coastal zones. In Sindh, the caste hierarchy is broadly organised with Sayyids at the apex of the Ashraf social order, followed by dominant agrarian and pastoral groups such as Sammats and Baloch. Castes are endogamous social groups that typically inhabit the same village or neighbourhood, or occupy separate but interdependent villages and localities, where relations are structured through inherited status, occupational specialisation, and unequal access to land, resources, and political authority. These interdependent yet hierarchical relationships are sustained through competing claims to honour, prestige, and ritual status, with dominant castes seeking to preserve social distinction while historically subordinated communities continue to bear the stigma of untouchability. Occupational caste groups, Pasmanda Muslim communities, such as Mallah, Solangi, Machi (largely descendants of

⁵ See Haris Gazdar, ‘Class, Caste or Race: Veils over Social Oppression in Pakistan’ (2007) *Economic and Political Weekly* 86; Zulfiqar Shah, *Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the Plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan* (TRDP and PILER 2007); Ayra Indrias Patras and Ahmed Usman, ‘Intersection of Gender, Work and Caste: The Case of Christian Female Sweepers of Lahore’ (2019) 56(2) *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 161; Mudassar Farooq, ‘The System Is Not Clean’ *The News International* (14 September 2023) <<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1109330-the-system-is-not-clean>> accessed 20 August 2026; Waqas H Butt, ‘Waste Intimacies: Caste and the Unevenness of Life in Urban Pakistan’ (2020) 47(3) *American Ethnologist* 234; Daanish Mustafa, ‘The Production of an Urban Hazardscape in Pakistan: Modernity, Vulnerability, and the Range of Choice’ (2005) 95(3) *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 566; Jennifer Bussell and Asim Fayaz, *The Political Economy of Disaster Preparedness and Risk Reduction in Pakistan* (Research Brief No 5, Robert S Strauss Center for International Security and Law, University of Texas at Austin 2017) <<https://www.strausscenter.org/cepsa>> accessed 20 August 2026; Ghulam Hussain, *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan: Dalit Assertions in a Culture of Denial* (1st edn, Routledge 2026).

⁶ Throughout this article, the term Dalit is used as a collective analytical category for Pakistan’s historically caste-oppressed communities that are officially recognised as Scheduled Castes (SCs), including the Bheel, Kolhi, Meghwar, Bazigar, and approximately forty other communities. Where appropriate, specific caste names are used to maintain ethnographic precision. Although the Baghri are not officially classified as a Scheduled Caste in Pakistan, they are included within the broader Dalit category because they experience comparable forms of caste-based exclusion and socioeconomic marginalisation. The term Pasmanda, borrowed from the Indian context, refers here to lower-caste communities that converted from Hinduism to Islam but continue to experience caste-based discrimination despite conversion. These include several fishing communities and *Nawan Musalman* (New Muslims), including the Jogi community. See Hussain, *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan* (n 5).

Hindu Dalit converts) and Black Sheedi (Afro-Sindhi) castes (ex-slaves traded across the Indian Ocean from Africa to Asia), and Dalit communities—including the Kolhi, Bheel, Meghwar, Baghri, and Oad—occupy the lowest positions within this social order. This unequal has spatial dimensions as distribution of land is not incidental but reflects enduring histories of caste-based exclusion that have shaped where marginalized communities are permitted to live, work, and endure environmental risk.

Although, Pakistan officially does not recognize caste within muslims, the question of pasmanda marginality, and dalit or Scheduled castes are recognized only as the leftover category from the colonial subcontinent, understanding these categories is essential because contemporary environmental vulnerability is inseparable from historical marginalization of underprivileged castes. Dalit and Pasmanda concentration in ecologically precarious landscapes is the outcome of colonial and postcolonial agrarian restructuring, unequal land ownership, occupational segregation, and the persistent failure of land reform, rather than environmental conditions alone.⁷ Climate change intensifies these historically produced inequalities but does not create them.

While a growing body of scholarship has shown that environmental injustice and climate governance are structured through caste,⁸ these debates have focused largely on India.⁹ By contrast, the relationship

⁷ Feroz Ahmed, 'Agrarian Change and Class Formation in Sindh' (1984) 19(39) *Economic and Political Weekly* A149; Daniel Haines, *Building the Empire, Building the Nation: Development, Legitimacy, and Hydro-Politics in Sind, 1843–1969* (Oxford University Press 2013); Ghulam Hussain and Anwaar Mohyuddin, 'Historical Sketch of Peasant Activism: Tracing Emancipatory Political Strategies of Peasant Activists of Sindh' (2014) 3(5) *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 23; Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India* (Oxford University Press 2018).

⁸ Mukul Sharma, *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* (Oxford University Press 2017); Indulata Prasad, 'Towards Dalit Ecologies' (2022) 13(1) *Environment and Society* 98–120; Bhimraj M., 'A Dalit Critique of Environmental Justice in India' in *Contemporary Environmental Concerns: Multi-Disciplinary Aspects of Environmental Law* (Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, Punjab 2020) 89–120; Malini Ranganathan, 'Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental Unfreedoms in Urban India' (2022) 45(2) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 257–277; Srilata Sircar, 'Reimagining Climate Justice as Caste Justice' in Prakash Kashwan (ed), *Climate Justice in India* (Cambridge University Press 2025) 162–182.

⁹ Bhimraj, 'Dalit Critique of Environmental Justice' (n 8); Amit Thorat and Omkar Joshi, *The Continuing Practice of Untouchability in India: Patterns and Mitigating Influences* (India Human Development Survey Working Paper No 3(2), 2015) 77; Sukhadeo Thorat and S Madheswaran, 'Graded Caste Inequality and Poverty: Evidence on the Role of Economic

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between caste, environmental governance, and disaster management in Pakistan remains comparatively underexplored. Research on floods, climate adaptation, and environmental governance has primarily examined infrastructure, governance, political economy, and class,¹⁰ while studies of caste have focused on agrarian relations, sanitation labour, urban marginality, and religious minorities.¹¹ Although recent scholarship has documented the gendered consequences of Pakistan's 2022 floods,¹² it rarely examines how caste structures and environmental vulnerability shapes access to humanitarian relief, climate adaptation, and post-disaster reconstruction, leaving the experiences of Dalit and Pasmenda communities—particularly women—largely invisible.¹³

This omission reflects not the disappearance of caste but its institutional naturalisation within Pakistan's postcolonial order.¹⁴ Across South Asia, caste inequalities are routinely translated into politically legible categories

Discrimination' (2018) 4(1) *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 3; S Arora, 'Intersectional Vulnerability in Post-Disaster Contexts: Lived Experiences of Dalit Women after the Nepal Earthquake, 2015' (2022) 46(2) *Disasters* 329; T Pandey and P Khattri, 'Locating Dalits in Disasters: A Review of Literature' (2024) 3(2) *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research* 367.

¹⁰ Daanish Mustafa, 'The Production of an Urban Hazardscape in Pakistan: Modernity, Vulnerability, and the Range of Choice' (2005) 95(3) *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 566; Bussell and Fayaz, *Climate Resilience and Urban Governance in Pakistan* (n 5).

¹¹ See Gazdar, 'Class, Caste or Race' (n 4); Shah, *Long Behind Schedule* (n 4); Patras and Usman, 'Intersection of Gender, Work and Caste' (n 4); Farooq, 'The System Is Not Clean' (n 5); Butt, 'Waste Intimacies' (n 5); Mustafa, 'Urban Hazardscape' (n 10); Bussell and Fayaz, *Climate Resilience and Urban Governance in Pakistan* (n 5); Hussain, *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan* (n 5).

¹² Mariam Ashraf, Sara Shahzad, Pamela Sequeria, Anam Bashir and Syed Khurram Azmat, 'Understanding Challenges Women Face in Flood-Affected Areas to Access Sexual and Reproductive Health Services: A Rapid Assessment from a Disaster-Torn Pakistan' (2024) *BioMed Research International* 2024, art 1113634; Falak Shad Memon, 'Women's Disaster Management Capacities: A Qualitative Study of Flood-Affected Areas of Sindh, Pakistan' (2023) 30(1) *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswar*; Wajihah Rizwan and others, 'Impact of Flood on Breastfeeding Practices at Flood Relief Camps of Pakistan' (2024) 40(8) *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences* 1724.

¹³ See Sumaira Feroz, 'Assessing Socioeconomic Impact of 2022 Floods in Sindh' (2024) 1(1) *Global Strategic Pulse: CISSS Journal of Geopolitical & Geo-economic Studies* 65.

¹⁴ Ahmed Memon, 'The Disorder of Things: Rethinking Social Critique in Postcolonial Pakistan' (TWAIL Review, 8 March 2022) <<https://twailr.com/the-disorder-of-things-rethinking-social-critique-in-postcolonial-pakistan/>> accessed 22 June 2025; Ahmed Memon, 'English in Taste, Indian in Blood': Caste Hegemony in the Making of British International Legal Thought' (2024) 12 *London Review of International Law* 23.

such as poverty, rurality, minority status, vulnerability, resilience, and disaster-affected households, obscuring their historical and transreligious character.¹⁵ If caste is a principal historical determinant of environmental vulnerability in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh and Punjab, why does it remain largely absent from climate governance, disaster management, environmental policy, and environmental scholarship?

2. Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Based on eighteen months of fieldwork (2019–2025) among Dalit and Pasmanda communities in Sindh, this article combines participant observation with semi-structured and life-history interviews, together with documentary analysis of government reports, humanitarian assessments, environmental impact studies, and development archives, we examine how disaster management, humanitarian relief, and post-disaster reconstruction classify populations while obscuring the caste relations through which environmental inequality is produced. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad (2019–2022), HANDS Welfare Foundation (2019–2023), and the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad (2023–2025). The research was conducted in accordance with established principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. To protect participants' privacy, all personal names have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. Ghulam Hussain (hereby referred to as 'my'), conceived and designed the study, conducted the ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2025), analysed the data, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. Naveed Ahmed Lashari (second author) also conducted fieldwork and contributed ethnographic materials (2019–2023) and expertise on post-flood reconstruction and humanitarian response, contributed to the interpretation of the findings and revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version. Conversational interviews and ethnographic interactions are treated not merely as sources of empirical data but as sites through which participants articulate lived experiences of caste, environmental dispossession, legal exclusion, and encounters with

¹⁵ See David Mosse, 'Caste and Development: Contemporary Perspectives on a Structure of Discrimination and Advantage' (2018) 110 *World Development* 422; David Mosse, 'The Modernity of Caste and the Market Economy' (2020) 54(4) *Modern Asian Studies* 1225; DE Berg, 'Race as a Political Frontier against Caste: WCAR, Dalits and India's Foreign Policy' (2018) 21(4) *Journal of International Relations and Development* 990.

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the state.

This article brings critical scholarship on caste into dialogue with the anthropology of the state, governance, and disaster management to examine how environmental vulnerability is classified, governed, and distributed in Pakistan. Rather than treating disasters as exceptional events or environmental vulnerability as a purely ecological condition, it approaches disaster governance as a field of bureaucratic practices through which populations become visible to the state and humanitarian institutions. Drawing on scholarship on bureaucracy, classification, state legibility,¹⁶ political ecology,¹⁷ and environmental justice, humanitarian governance, and quantification,¹⁸ the article examines how administrative categories simultaneously recognise environmental vulnerability while obscuring the caste relations through which that vulnerability is historically produced. Sharma's concept of eco-casteism,¹⁹ Prasad's work on Dalit ecologies that he conceptualises as a framework for examining 'caste-based segregation, dispossession, dehumanization, appropriation of Dalit labor and ecological knowledge'²⁰ in relation to environmental inequality. If, as Prasad argues, nature is "caste-ized," this article demonstrates that environmental governance is likewise caste-structured, even as caste disappears from the administrative categories through which vulnerability is governed. While eco-casteism and Dalit ecologies have demonstrated that environmental inequality is structured through caste, socio-legal scholarship has shown how caste is simultaneously constituted, regulated,

¹⁶ Geoffrey C Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (MIT Press 1999); Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Duke University Press 2007); Sally Engle Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking* (University of Chicago Press 2016); James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press 1998); Michael N Barnett, 'Humanitarian Governance' (2013) 16 *Annual Review of Political Science* 379–398; Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality* (n 3).

¹⁷ Jesse Ribot, 'Cause and Response: Vulnerability and Climate in the Anthropocene' (2014) 41(5) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 667; Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters* (2nd edn, Routledge 2004); Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (3rd edn, Wiley-Blackwell 2020).

¹⁸ Levien, *Dispossession without Development* (n 7); Tania Murray Li, *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Duke University Press 2014).

¹⁹ Sharma, *Caste and Nature* (n 8).

²⁰ Prasad, *Towards Dalit Ecologies* (n 8).

and often obscured through legal and institutional frameworks.²¹ This article brings these conversations into dialogue with disaster governance in Pakistan.

Rather than revisiting the established argument that environmental degradation and climate adaptation reproduce caste hierarchies,²² this article examines a different question: how do governance institutions render caste administratively invisible while governing inequalities that remain caste-structured? We develop the concept of governed invisibility to explain this institutional process. Governance does not simply ignore caste; it translates caste inequalities into alternative administrative categories such as poverty, minority status, vulnerability, displacement, and geographic exposure, thereby rendering caste politically and bureaucratically unintelligible.

We argue that this process operates through four overlapping regimes of political legibility specific to Pakistan: Sindhi nationalist political Sufism, state-driven political Islam, humanitarian-development governance, and local feudal-caste authority. They demonstrate how religious and political formations shape the visibility of environmental vulnerability while simultaneously obscuring caste relations through which that vulnerability is historically organised. In doing so, the article extends existing debates on eco-casteism and climate justice beyond predominantly Hindu-centred analyses by showing how caste continues to organise environmental governance across both Dalit and Pasmanda Muslim communities in Pakistan.

3. Governed Invisibility

The crisis of environmental governance became particularly apparent during ethnographic fieldwork in Larkana District. Here, the floods unfolded not simply as a climatic disaster but through the everyday workings of drainage infrastructure, bureaucratic decision-making, and local power relations. Across much of Sindh, rivers overflowed their banks

²¹ Arvind Kumar, 'Exclusion of Pasmanda Muslims and Dalit Christians from the Scheduled Caste Quota' (2023) 43(2) *South Asia Research* 192–209; Meena Dhanda, 'Castes and Casteism' in Hugh LaFollette (ed), *International Encyclopedia of Ethics* (John Wiley & Sons 2022); Annapurna Waughray, *Capturing Caste in Law: The Legal Regulation of Caste Discrimination* (1st edn, Routledge 2024).

²² Ranganathan, *Environmental Unfreedoms* (n 8); Sircar, 'Climate Justice as Caste Justice' (n 8).

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and submerged extensive agricultural land. In Larkana, however, the disaster followed a different trajectory. As both an ethnographer and a native of the district involved in humanitarian relief, I found that flooding resulted less from the Indus overflowing than from the collapse of the *seem-nallas*—drainage channels designed to carry seepage and rainwater. Overwhelmed by unprecedented rainfall, they failed to discharge accumulated water, transforming villages into stagnant lakes that remained inundated long after the monsoon ended. Six months later, floodwaters still covered much of rural Larkana. To reach the village of Waryam Jogi, I waded nearly a kilometer through murky water that rose almost to my knees. The metaled road had disappeared beneath stagnant floodwaters while the surrounding *seem-nallas* remained full. The landscape resembled an inland lake where only the crowns of trees, scattered embankments, and the ruins of collapsed houses interrupted the expanse of water. As I approached, an elderly Jogi man paused what he was doing. He had been preparing to slaughter the only rooster left in his household so he could offer me what he called “a proper meal.” Seeing me arrive early, he quietly set the knife aside, greeted me warmly, and invited me to sit on a half-broken woven cot. Inside the hut, little remained: a copper storage chest, a few battered cooking utensils, and mud-stained walls. Around us, nearly every mud house had collapsed into the floodwaters. Only a small brick mosque, built on a raised plinth, remained standing amid the devastation. Waryam was the *chango murs* (recognised elder) of a settlement of thirty-five Jogi households. Reflecting on the floods, he recalled:

In all my life, I have never seen rain like this. It rained continuously for almost fifteen days, then on and off for another two months. My father died during the rains after developing pneumonia. We kept his body inside the house for two days, hoping the rain would stop, but there was no way to reach the graveyard, so we buried him beside the mosque. Even he, at ninety years old, said he had never witnessed such rainfall.

After a pause, he pointed to the muddy floor. Water had begun seeping into their homes weeks after the rains, forcing families to take refuge in the mosque, the only structure on higher ground. Waryam observed:

Everything is gone—our crops, our livestock, our homes.

Relief eventually arrived through local philanthropists, but only indirectly. Aid trucks stopped several kilometres away, and supplies were transported by donkey carts and boats to a neighbouring village. Waryam recalled:

We were among the first to arrive, but we were the last to receive.

When I assumed they had arrived late, he shook his head. “No. Our place was already decided.” Relief distribution followed an unspoken hierarchy. The local *wadera*, affiliated with the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party, prioritised political supporters regardless of caste, but among the remaining recipients assistance followed the local caste order. Sayyid households received relief first, followed by Sammat and Baloch families, while the Jogi settlement invariably stood at the end of the queue. As Waryam put it, “Our turn always comes last.” Only four of the settlement’s thirty-five households received ration bags, which were shared among the entire village. Humanitarian organisations arrived months later. Waryam explained, “Hilal Ahmer (Red Crescent) and Al-Khidmat visited other villages first. They came to us almost two months later, bringing whatever was left—some tents and a few ration bags.” Government officials later promised housing compensation. “They told us we would receive two hundred thousand rupees to build two-room houses.” When I returned two years later, Waryam was still waiting. While neighbouring villages had begun reconstruction, his settlement remained in makeshift shelters because the promised instalments had never arrived.

Waryam’s experience demonstrates that although floods inundated villages regardless of caste, relief, recovery, and reconstruction unfolded through longstanding hierarchies of landownership, caste, and political authority. Before survivors became administratively legible as “affected households,” “beneficiaries,” or “climate-vulnerable populations,” they already occupied profoundly unequal social and spatial positions.

Across rural Sindh, caste has long organised the geography of settlement.²³ Dominant landowning groups generally inhabit villages with better infrastructure, public services, and political access, while many Dalit and Pasmenda communities occupy peripheral hamlets, fishing

²³ Ghulam Hussain, ‘Understanding Hegemony of Caste in Political Islam and Sufism in Sindh, Pakistan’ (2019) 54(5) *Journal of Asian and African Studies*; Ghulam Hussain, *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan* (n 5).

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settlements, the Indus Delta, and drainage corridors. These landscapes reflect colonial and postcolonial agrarian restructuring, unequal landownership, and failed land reform.²⁴ Although British irrigation schemes expanded agricultural production, they concentrated irrigated land among privileged landlords, leaving many Dalit and Pasmānda communities as tenants, sharecroppers, bonded labourers, and seasonal workers. Contemporary environmental vulnerability thus reflects historically caste-structured inequalities in land, settlement, and labour. These inequalities became especially visible during the floods. Reaching Bagri, Bheel, Jogi, Oad, Brohi, and Machi settlements often required leaving metalled roads and crossing narrow embankments through irrigated fields. Dominant-caste villages formed administrative centres containing schools, mosques, shops, health facilities, and influential Sayyid households, whereas Dalit and Pasmānda settlements were typically located beyond the village centre in low-lying areas bordering drainage canals and seasonal watercourses. As one elder from Mehar explained:

People who want to help us cannot easily reach our settlement. Most assistance comes through the wadero or the Sayyed families because they have connections with the sarkar (government) and the NGOs.

Humanitarian organisations rarely distributed aid directly to dispersed settlements. Instead, they relied on landlords and local elites to prepare beneficiary lists. Although presented as neutral administrative procedures, these practices reproduced existing relations of caste and patronage, leaving many peripheral settlements only partially visible—or absent altogether—from humanitarian records. These examples demonstrate that environmental governance does more than respond to vulnerability; it constructs the administrative categories through which vulnerability becomes visible and governable.²⁵ Contemporary systems of climate adaptation, disaster-risk reduction, and post-disaster reconstruction rely on vulnerability assessments, beneficiary registries, and other classificatory technologies to determine eligibility for assistance. Extending older

²⁴ Feroz Ahmed, 'Agrarian Change and Class Formation in Sindh' (1984) 19(39) *Economic and Political Weekly* A149; Daniel Haines, *Building the Empire, Building the Nation: Development, Legitimacy, and Hydro-Politics in Sind, 1843–1969* (Oxford University Press 2013); Michael Levien, *Dispossession without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India* (Oxford University Press 2018).

²⁵ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out* (n 16); Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification* (n 16); Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (n 16).

techniques of rendering populations legible for governance, these practices produce new forms of environmental governmentality.²⁶ In doing so, these classificatory practices create the institutional conditions through which caste continues to shape environmental inequality while disappearing from the bureaucratic categories through which vulnerability is recognised, measured, and governed. Populations are rendered legible through religious, regional, humanitarian, and administrative identities, while historically constituted inequalities of land, labour, occupation, and social status are translated into ostensibly universal categories of vulnerability. The result is an administrative order in which environmental risk, humanitarian relief, and post-disaster recovery continue to be distributed along caste lines even as caste itself remains largely absent from the categories through which these inequalities are understood and addressed.

This institutional invisibility is sustained through four overlapping regimes of political legibility. The first is Sindhi nationalist political Sufism, a discourse that frames Sindh as a historically distinct and culturally plural region whose political and economic marginalisation stems from the highly centralised, Punjab-dominated Pakistani state.²⁷ Within this framework, Sindhis are represented as a culturally unified people whose internal differences are secondary to the larger struggle against external domination. Caste discrimination, although acknowledged by some, is generally treated as a non-antagonistic social problem that will be resolved through greater regional autonomy or the dismantling of Punjab-centric state dominance. Consequently, while this discourse offers a powerful critique of state centralisation and ethnonational inequality, it subsumes internal social hierarchies within a shared regional identity, leaving caste largely unexamined.

The second is state-driven political Islam, which imagines Muslims as a single egalitarian community while positioning non-Muslims within a residual minority category.²⁸ Within this framework, recognising caste among Muslims appears incompatible with the constitutional self-image of Pakistan as an Islamic republic and with state-led imaginaries of charity, welfare, and social solidarity. The third regime is humanitarian-development governance, in which state agencies, international organisations, multilateral development banks, bilateral donors, and

²⁶ Agrawal, *Environmentality* (n 3).

²⁷ Ghulam Hussain, 'The Myth of Sufi Sindh: Reflections on the Orientalist and Nationalist Historiography' (2024) 26(2) *Interventions* 317–337.

²⁸ Hussain, 'Understanding Hegemony of Caste in Political Islam and Sufism' (n 23); Hussain, *Architecture of Caste in Pakistan* (n 5).

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national and international NGOs classify populations through technical categories such as disaster-affected households, vulnerable communities, smallholder farmers, programme beneficiaries, and rights-bearing citizens. While indispensable for coordinating relief and reconstruction, these classificatory practices translate historically constituted inequalities into universal languages of vulnerability, resilience, humanitarian need, and human rights, privileging technical intervention over structural explanation.

These three regimes do not eliminate caste; they render it administratively unintelligible. Their operation, however, depends upon a fourth regime: local feudal-caste authority. Embedded within village- and district-level structures of patronage, landlords (*waderas*), *pirs*, tribal leaders, elected intermediaries, and other local elites openly organise access to land, labour, political patronage, humanitarian assistance, and post-disaster reconstruction through caste relations. Rather than operating separately from state and humanitarian institutions, this regime mediates their implementation on the ground. Beneficiary lists, damage assessments, compensation claims, and relief distribution are routinely negotiated through local caste hierarchies, allowing state welfare programmes and humanitarian interventions to be translated into caste-structured practices of inclusion and exclusion. As a result, caste rarely appears as an explicit administrative category even as it continues to organise who receives assistance, when assistance arrives, and how recovery unfolds.

We conceptualise this process as governed invisibility: the institutional production of administrative visibility through which populations become legible as vulnerable while the caste relations organising unequal environmental vulnerability disappear within ostensibly neutral bureaucratic categories. Environmental governance does not simply overlook caste; it displaces caste into universal languages of poverty, resilience, marginality, and climate vulnerability. The result is an environmental governance regime that recognises suffering without recognising the historical social relations through which vulnerability is produced—a condition that echoes Nancy Fraser's formulation of recognition without redistribution.²⁹ This contradiction emerged repeatedly during fieldwork. During an interview in Dadu District, an elder

²⁹ Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, Participation* (Discussion Paper FS I 98-108, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung 1998) <<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-126247>> accessed 20 August 2026; Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age' (1995) 1/212 *New Left Review* 68–93.

from the Oad community laughed when I asked whether officials had identified his settlement as a priority during post-flood registration, he said:

They only asked for my CNIC and my father's name. They never asked who we were or which community we belonged to. But we could see how eager they were to register the Muslim villages and the wadiyon zaatiyon (privileged castes) before us.

After a pause, he added:

We are always on the last page of their register. When aid is distributed, the privileged communities receive it first, and we get whatever is left. Many families in our settlement are still waiting for their houses to be registered for compensation.

His account captures a recurring pattern: administrative procedures produced formally universal categories of vulnerability, while the social distribution of relief remained structured by caste. Despite their different ideological foundations, state political Islam, Sindhi nationalism, humanitarian institutions, and local caste authority converge in refusing to recognise caste as a constitutive determinant of environmental vulnerability. Climate governance operationalises these competing political projects through bureaucratic infrastructures, including vulnerability assessments, beneficiary registries, disaster databases, and resilience frameworks—that determine who becomes visible to intervention.³⁰ The same institutional logic is evident in Pakistan's engagement with international human rights institutions. In successive reports submitted under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Pakistan has consistently maintained that caste discrimination does not exist and that recognising caste categories would itself constitute discrimination.³¹ By extending the

³⁰ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out* (n 16); Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification* (n 16); Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (n 16); Matthew S Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (University of California Press 2012).

³¹ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties under Article 9 of the Convention: Pakistan* UN Doc CERD/C/PAK/21-23 (2015) 12; Rita Izsák-Ndiaye, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues on her Mission to Brazil: Note by the Secretariat* (A/HRC/31/56/Add.1,

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political logic of Islamic egalitarianism into international legal arenas, the state institutionalises a vision of Pakistani society in which caste lies outside the national social order. Although the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) have repeatedly urged Pakistan to collect caste-disaggregated data and address descent-based discrimination, these recommendations have had little influence on environmental governance.³² As David Mosse argues, development institutions routinely translate politically contentious social relations into apparently neutral administrative categories.³³ In Pakistan, caste similarly disappears into classifications such as poverty, vulnerability, and marginalisation. This classificatory logic is reproduced in climate governance.

This institutional mechanism resembles a form of climate caste blindness: the systematic omission of caste from the categories through which environmental risk and recovery are governed. Understanding this paradox requires shifting attention from bureaucratic classifications to the historical production of vulnerability through colonial land settlement, hydraulic development, unequal agrarian restructuring, and failed land reform, which concentrated caste-oppressed communities in ecologically fragile landscapes. This argument builds on Sharma's concept of eco-casteism, which demonstrates that environmental degradation and ecological inequality are historically organised through caste rather than constituting merely technical or natural problems.³⁴ It also resonates with Prasad's notion of Dalit ecologies, which foregrounds how caste shapes

2016); United Nations, *Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* (CERD/C/PAK/CO/21-23, 2016) <<https://daccess-ods.un.org/>> accessed 20 August 2026; United Nations, *Summary Record of the 2470th Meeting, Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 90th Session* (CERD/C/SR.2470, 2016) <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/844418?v=pdf>> accessed 20 August 2026; United Nations, *Summary Record of the 2471st Meeting, Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 90th Session* (CERD/C/SR.2471, 2016) <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/844419?v=pdf>> accessed 20 August 2026; United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Pakistan* (E/C.12/PAK/CO/1, 2017) 5 <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1318562?ln=en&v=pdf>> accessed 20 August 2026.

³² United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ibid) 5.

³³ Mosse, 'Caste and Development' (n 15); Mosse, 'The Modernity of Caste and the Market Economy' (n 15).

³⁴ Sharma, *Caste and Nature* (n 8).

differentiated relationships to land, water, labour, and ecological worlds.³⁵ Climatic disasters intensify rather than create these inherited inequalities, which are reproduced through historically sedimented configurations of landownership, labour relations, settlement patterns, ecological dependence, and political marginalisation.³⁶ In the Pakistani context, these dynamics extend beyond Hindu Dalit communities to encompass Pasmanda Muslims and other caste-oppressed groups whose ecological marginalisation has been shaped by distinct religious and political histories.

Across Sindh, these dynamics affect Dalit communities such as the Kolhi, Bheel, and Meghwar; Pasmanda Muslim occupational communities; indigenous fishing groups including the Mallah, Machi, Mirbahar, and Mirani, Afro-Sindhi (Sheedi) communities; and pastoral populations inhabiting environmentally fragile regions. Although they differ in religion, language, and livelihood, they occupy comparable structural positions because their lives remain closely tied to land, rivers, lakes, forests, fisheries, grazing lands, and other ecological commons. These dynamics are evident across multiple environmental settings. The Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) and Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), constructed to improve agricultural productivity, have generated water contamination, salinisation, biodiversity loss, and the degradation of fisheries.³⁷ These impacts disproportionately affect fishing communities, small cultivators, and landless labourers whose livelihoods depend on aquatic ecosystems. Yet assessments of these projects have generally interpreted their consequences as technical failures of water management rather than examining how hydraulic infrastructure redistributes environmental risks across historically caste-differentiated landscapes. Similar dynamics characterise the ecological degradation of Manchar and Keenjhar Lakes,³⁸

³⁵ Prasad, *Towards Dalit Ecologies* (n 8).

³⁶ Ahmed, *Agrarian Change and Class Formation* (n 24); Haines, *Building the Empire, Building the Nation* (n 24); Ghulam Hussain and Anwaar Mohyuddin, *Historical Sketch of Peasant Activism: Tracing Emancipatory Political Strategies of Peasant Activists of Sindh* (2014) 3(5) *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 23; Levien, *Dispossession without Development* (n 24).

³⁷ Ali Asghar Mahessar and others, 'Assessment of Water Quality of LBOD System and Environmental Concerns' (2016) 15(1) *Quaid-e-Awam University Research Journal of Engineering, Science & Technology* 32.

³⁸ Zhao Xu and others, 'Availability and Access to Livelihood Capital Assets for Development of Sustainable Livelihood Strategies of Fishermen: A Case Study of Manchar Lake, Pakistan' (2023) 9(12) *Heliyon*; Arain and others, 'Evaluation of Physico-Chemical Parameters of

where declining water quality and fish stocks threaten livelihoods, ecological knowledge, and collective identities, of indigenous fishing communities.³⁹ Compensation schemes, corporate social responsibility initiatives, and reverse osmosis plants acknowledge environmental harm⁴⁰ but leave intact the historical inequalities determining who bears its costs.

4. *Caste Blindness, Relief, and Recovery*

A week after my first visit to Waryam Jogi's village, a convoy of government trucks accompanied by humanitarian organisations arrived at the nearby union council headquarters to distribute relief. Before sunrise, people from surrounding villages queued with national identity cards, hoping their names would appear on beneficiary lists. Volunteers unloaded flour, rice, pulses, cooking oil, bottled water, mosquito nets, tarpaulin sheets, blankets, hygiene kits, tents, and other supplies while officials called names through loudspeakers. When Waryam returned, he quietly spread the contents of his ration bag across the damp floor of the mosque where his family had taken refuge: flour, rice, lentils, cooking oil, tea, sugar, biscuits, a mosquito net, and two blankets. Looking around at the families sheltering there, he remarked, “These things will help us survive for a few days, but they cannot rebuild our homes or bring back our animals.” His neighbour added, “When the water goes, we will still have nothing left.”

Over the following weeks, I accompanied relief teams across flood-affected villages. Officially, millions of relief items were distributed across Sindh.⁴¹ Yet prolonged engagement revealed that humanitarian assistance

Manchar Lake Water and Their Comparison with Other Global Published Values' (2008) 9(2) *Pakistan Journal of Analytical and Environmental Chemistry* 101-109; Muhammad Yar Khuhawar and others, 'Assessment of Variation in Water Quality at Right Bank Outfall Drain, Including Manchar Lake, Sindh, Pakistan' (2023) 103(16) *International Journal of Environmental Analytical Chemistry* 4598; Raima Mehmood and others, 'Health Risks Associated with Accumulation of Heavy Metals in Fish of Keenjhar Lake, Pakistan' (2020) 27 *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 24162-24172.

³⁹ Muhammad Yar Khuhawar and others, 'Assessment of Variation in Water Quality at Right Bank Outfall Drain, Including Manchar Lake, Sindh, Pakistan' (2023) 103(16) *International Journal of Environmental Analytical Chemistry* 4598.

⁴⁰ Jhaman Das Hirani and Dileep Sukhani, 'Examining the Operational Efficiency of Reverse Osmosis (RO) Plants in Tharparkar' (2023) 4(1) *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 738.

⁴¹ Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) Sindh, *Flood 2022 in Sindh: From 20*

circulated through existing institutions of landlords, political brokers, kinship networks, and administrative structures historically shaped by caste, class, and unequal access to state authority. Humanitarian governance made environmental suffering administratively visible while leaving intact the caste-based institutions that had long organised unequal vulnerability.

Official assessments of the 2010 and 2022 floods exemplify broader dynamics of disaster governance, in which administrative systems prioritise coordination, categorisation, and recovery while often overlooking historically produced inequalities.⁴² They meticulously quantified rainfall, infrastructure damage, agricultural losses, displacement, and relief operations, yet failed to explain why some communities experienced disproportionately greater loss and slower recovery. Those most severely affected were disproportionately landless Dalit and Pasmanda communities whose vulnerability reflected entrenched histories of caste exclusion rather than environmental misfortune alone. The Provincial Disaster Management Authority's (PDMA) 2022 assessment demonstrates this institutional logic. Although it provides detailed accounts of flood impacts and recommends improved drainage, technological monitoring, satellite imagery, and disaster preparedness,⁴³ flood-affected people appear primarily as households, beneficiaries, displaced persons, caseloads, and affected populations. The report counts damaged houses, roads, cropland, and relief items but never asks whether displacement, aid distribution, or recovery followed existing patterns of caste inequality. Humanitarian success is measured through tents erected, ration bags distributed, roads repaired, and households reached, revealing little about distributive justice or caste-shaped access to assistance and reconstruction.

This mode of representation extends what Mukul Sharma describes as *eco-casteism*, in which environmental degradation and its remedies are framed as technical or developmental problems while the caste relations organising unequal ecological vulnerability remain obscured.⁴⁴ Rather than examining how environmental risk is historically produced through caste, official assessments render vulnerability intelligible through universal

June 2022 to 31 March 2023 (Rehabilitation Department, Government of Sindh 2023) <<https://pdma.gos.pk/Documents/Reports/Flood%202022%20In%20Sindh.pdf>> accessed 24 July 2026.

⁴² Kathleen Tierney, 'Disaster Governance: Social, Political, and Economic Dimensions' (2012) 37 *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 341.

⁴³ Provincial Disaster Management Authority, Flood 2022 Sindh (n 1).

⁴⁴ Sharma, *Caste and Nature* (n 8).

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administrative categories. The Pakistan Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) follows a similar logic. Although it briefly lists caste alongside other vulnerable groups, it treats caste as one administrative category rather than a historical institution organising environmental inequality. Vulnerability is rendered intelligible through bureaucratic classifications while caste disappears from analytical view, exemplifying climate caste blindness. The same pattern characterises humanitarian assessments by Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), HANDS Welfare Foundation (HANDS), and the National Disaster Consortium, which documented infrastructure damage, livelihoods, shelter, health, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), and protection needs but rendered affected populations legible primarily as households, displaced families, daily wage labourers, women, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. Likewise, the World Bank's Sindh Flood Emergency Rehabilitation Project (SFERP) improved infrastructure and promoted a “build back better”⁴⁵ strategy, yet treated poverty and climate vulnerability as technical problems rather than outcomes of unequal landownership, insecure tenancy, landlord dominance, and caste-based disparities in access to state resources.⁴⁶ Reconstruction was measured through engineering outputs and households reached rather than changes in the social relations producing unequal vulnerability. Consequently, these interventions largely restored, rather than transformed, the political and social conditions that had rendered marginalised communities disproportionately vulnerable before the floods.

These limitations became apparent during a follow-up visit to a reconstructed settlement in Larkana. When I asked a Bagri horticultural labourer whether recovery programmes had improved everyday life, he smiled faintly before replying: it stated:

Before the floods, we did not live in pakka (brick)

⁴⁵ World Bank, ‘Factsheet: Sindh Flood Emergency Rehabilitation Project’ (19 December 2022) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/12/19/factsheet-sindh-flood-emergency-rehabilitation-project>> accessed 20 August 2026; World Bank, ‘Rising from the Waters: Sindh Navigates Recovery after the 2022 Floods’ (5 July 2023) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/06/28/rising-from-the-waters-sindh-navigates-recovery-after-the-2022-floods>> accessed 20 August 2026.

⁴⁶ Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters* (2nd edn, Routledge 2004); Anthony Oliver-Smith, ‘Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters’ (1996) 25 *Annual Review of Anthropology* 303; Jesse Ribot, ‘Cause and Response: Vulnerability and Climate in the Anthropocene’ (2014) 41 (5) *Journal of Peasant Studies* 667.

houses. Most of us lived in katcha (mud) houses or in homemade semi-permanent tents. We did not have much to lose, but whatever little we had was completely washed away. When government officials came to assess the damage, our wadero told them that we did not need houses. He said tents would be enough for people like us. So, they gave us tents and ration bags, but nothing more.

After a pause, he added: stated:

Nothing has changed. We still have no land of our own, we still work for the landlords, and we still depend on them for everything. Our tents are new, but our lives are colder than they were before.

His testimony captures a central limitation of post-disaster reconstruction. Recovery programmes repaired physical infrastructure while leaving untouched the unequal relations of landownership, labour, and political dependence that had produced vulnerability in the first place. The Sindh case extends insight from the literature on political ecology⁴⁷ by demonstrating that these inequalities are fundamentally organised through caste. Repeated failures of the Left Bank Outfall Drain (LBOD) and Right Bank Outfall Drain (RBOD), together with chronic waterlogging, salinisation, and declining fisheries, have transformed large areas of Badin, Sanghar, Mirpurkhas, and Thatta into increasingly precarious environments. These environmental transformations have disproportionately affected fishing communities, small cultivators, and landless labourers whose livelihoods depend directly on fragile ecological systems. During fieldwork in villages surrounding the LBOD, residents repeatedly distinguished between two kinds of water. *Jeero pani*—living water—nourished fields, replenished ponds, sustained livestock, and enabled cultivation. *Murdar pani*—dead water—referred to stagnant mixtures of drainage effluent, industrial waste, sewage, and floodwater trapped for months after the monsoon. This distinction was not merely ecological but moral and political. Living water symbolised fertility and continuity; dead water signified abandonment and environmental neglect. Such distinctions resonate with Prasad's notion of Dalit ecologies, which emphasises that ecological worlds are experienced through historically

⁴⁷ Wisner and others, *At Risk* (ibid); Robbins, *Political Ecology* (n 17).

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unequal caste relations rather than as neutral natural environments.⁴⁸ For residents, water was not simply a biophysical resource but a lived social environment shaped by histories of caste, labour, and unequal access to land and infrastructure. Older villagers contrasted contemporary flooding with earlier generations, recalling seasonal inundation as part of the ecological rhythm of the Indus Basin. Floodwaters once deposited fertile silt, replenished wetlands, and gradually receded. Contemporary floods, by contrast, were experienced as prolonged ecological degradation produced by polluted drainage systems, failed hydraulic infrastructure, and stagnant water that destroyed rather than regenerated livelihoods.

5. *Relocation of Caste Inequality*

As fisherfolk and sharecroppers lost land to salinity and contamination, many migrated to informal settlements around Karachi, Hyderabad, and Mirpurkhas, where caste continued to shape access to employment, housing, and public services. Official explanations frequently attribute flood losses to villages located on former waterways or low-lying land, naturalising what are fundamentally political landscapes. Safer and more productive land has historically remained under the control of dominant landed castes—including Sayyid, Pathan, Baloch, Sammat and Sodha Rajput elites—who exercise considerable influence over irrigation, drainage, and land allocation. Dalit and Pasmanda communities have consequently been concentrated in environmentally hazardous locations as tenants, bonded labourers, sharecroppers, and informal settlers with few resources to relocate. Environmental exposure is therefore socially and historically produced rather than geographically accidental.

The same processes of caste blindness are reproduced through humanitarian governance. The Research and Development Foundation's (RDF) flood situation analysis documents coping strategies such as selling livestock to secure food, shelter, and medical care, yet it treats affected populations as uniformly vulnerable, overlooking the unequal resources through which different communities confront disaster.⁴⁹

Many Dalit and Pasmanda households possess few productive assets,

⁴⁸ Prasad, *Towards Dalit Ecologies* (n 8).

⁴⁹ Research and Development Foundation (RDF), *Flood 2022 and Response of RDF* (Research and Development Foundation 2023) <<https://rdfoundation.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Flood-2022-RDF-RESPONSE-.pdf>> accessed 20 August 2026.

lack formal land titles, and are consequently excluded from compensation and post-disaster recovery programmes. Relief camps likewise become informally stratified through caste, with dominant-caste Hindus and Muslims exercising greater influence over the distribution of aid, shelter, and rehabilitation assistance. Humanitarian assessments therefore render environmental suffering administratively visible while simultaneously obscuring the caste relations through which vulnerability, relief, and recovery are differentially organised. This is not simply an omission but an instance of governed invisibility,⁵⁰ extending rather than transforming the conditions identified in recent scholarship on eco-casteism and climate justice.⁵¹

These inequalities persist long after floodwaters recede through environmental displacement. Recurrent flooding, declining agricultural productivity, salinisation, and ecological degradation have encouraged many Dalit and Pasmanda households to migrate to informal settlements around Larkana, Sukkur, and Dadu. Migration, however, rarely dissolves caste inequality; it relocates it. One young Bagri man living on the outskirts of Larkana explained:

We came here to stay near our relatives because we thought they would look after us. Local philanthropists brought us ration, so we survived. But when government officials came to register flood-affected families, they told us we did not belong here. They said, "Go back to your village. That is where you will be registered." But when we returned, no one came.

Laughing quietly, he concluded:

It was as if we belonged nowhere.

Asked whether Bagri families already living near Larkana city had received greater support, he replied:

They were not flooded like we were, so they did not

⁵⁰ Agrawal, *Environmentality* (n 16); Haines, *Building the Empire, Building the Nation* (n 24).

⁵¹ Mukul Sharma, 'Eco-casteism: Sulabh and the Denial of Dalit Existence' in *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* (Oxford University Press 2017) 1–59; Prasad, *Towards Dalit Ecologies* (n 8).

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expect much help. Most of them work as horticultural labourers on the lands of local landlords, growing watermelons and vegetables. The floods destroyed their crops as well, but there is no insurance for people like us. Whatever compensation was paid for agricultural losses went directly to the landlords because the land belongs to them.

Although he had left his village, he continued working as a daily-wage labourer in an informal settlement. Migration had changed his residence but not the unequal relations of land, labour, and dependency shaping everyday life. Comparable transformations are visible among semi-nomadic Brohi communities. Environmental degradation, shrinking pastures, water scarcity, and the enclosure of commons have made seasonal mobility increasingly untenable, encouraging permanent settlement on the outskirts of Sindh's towns and cities.

As one Brohi elder explained:

Nomadism is not our choice, it's a compulsion, a habit, and a way of life... But things are now changing, and many of our relatives are settling permanently in Sindh. Our status as a tribe is being replaced with the status as caste, lower in order and status than we previously enjoyed.

His observation reveals that environmental change is reshaping not only livelihoods but also social identities, as permanent settlement increasingly incorporates Brohi communities into local caste hierarchies that organise access to labour, land, welfare, and political recognition.

These structural inequalities were only partially recognised within humanitarian responses. Assessments documented coping strategies such as selling livestock, borrowing money, reducing food consumption, and seeking temporary employment, yet remained largely silent about the unequal conditions from which different communities entered the disaster. Many Dalit and Pasmanda households possessed few productive assets because generations of landlessness, occupational segregation, and political exclusion had prevented meaningful asset accumulation. Universal humanitarian categories therefore acknowledged environmental suffering while obscuring the unequal social relations through which it had

been produced. Cyclone Biparjoy in 2023⁵² exposed similar dynamics among Mallah fishing communities and Makrani (Sheedi) populations whose livelihoods had already been undermined by declining fisheries, mangrove degradation, and reduced freshwater flows. Field observations further revealed that evacuation centres frequently lacked adequate sanitation, privacy, reproductive healthcare, and culturally appropriate facilities for women and children, illustrating how climate hazards are experienced through unequal conditions of protection and care.

The unprecedented humanitarian response following the 2022 floods revealed both the strengths and limitations of Pakistan's welfare architecture. Emergency assistance was channelled primarily through the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)⁵³ and provincial relief initiatives. Under the Flood Relief Cash Assistance Programme, affected households received PKR 25,000, while housing compensation reached PKR 250,000 for partially damaged and PKR 500,000 for destroyed houses. Overall, PKR 37.2 billion was distributed through emergency assistance, PKR 35 billion through BISP, more than 941,000 temporary shelters and 2.5 million ration bags were provided, and the NDMA received PKR 5 billion for relief operations.⁵⁴ By expenditure and beneficiary numbers, this represented one of Pakistan's largest humanitarian responses. Yet fieldwork suggested that one-time cash transfers and housing compensation remained largely palliative, offering temporary relief without addressing the structural conditions producing vulnerability.

Access to assistance remained profoundly shaped by caste. Across Larkana, Dadu, Badin and Mirpurkhas, beneficiary verification, cash disbursement, and housing compensation were routinely mediated through landlords, village brokers, politically connected intermediaries, and local bureaucracies embedded within caste hierarchies. Dalit and Pasmanda households frequently reported delayed registration, exclusion

⁵² Feriha Fatima Khidri, Hina Riaz and Abid Hussain Khuwaja, 'Cyclone Biparjoy: A Test of Pakistan's Disaster Preparedness' (2023) 17 *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* e454.

⁵³ Ali Rehmat, Shafqat Munir Ahmad, Salman Danish, Awais Umar, Ahmed Khaver and Ramsha Mehboob Khan, *Claiming Reparation for Loss and Damage Due to Floods 2022: The Case of Pakistan* (Sustainable Development Policy Institute 2023) <<https://sdpi.org/assets/lib/uploads/Claiming%20Reparation%20for%20Loss%20and%20Damage%20Due%20to%20Floods%202022>> accessed 10 June 2025.

⁵⁴ Finance Department, Government of Sindh, *Sindh Flood Relief Fund* <<https://finance.gos.pk/Covid/FloodReliefFund?path=Covid%2FFloodReliefFund>> accessed 10 June 2025.

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from beneficiary lists, informal deductions from BISP payments, and repeated administrative obstacles. Women often spent entire days waiting in overcrowded payment centres, while elderly recipients endured repeated verification procedures before receiving assistance. These encounters were experienced not simply as bureaucratic inefficiency but as reminders of subordinate social status. Although BISP disburses payments in women's names, control over these resources often remains with male household members, while many Dalit and Pasmanda women continue to be assetless and politically marginalised. As research from rural India similarly suggests, directing cash to women may improve household consumption while leaving underlying inequalities intact where land and productive assets remain concentrated elsewhere.⁵⁵ Without addressing caste-based landlessness, unequal property rights, and women's substantive control over productive resources, welfare programmes in Pakistan risk mitigating symptoms while leaving structural vulnerability unchanged.

The rehabilitation phase reproduced many of the inequalities that had rendered Dalit and Pasmanda communities disproportionately vulnerable before the floods. Reconstruction prioritised housing, infrastructure, and resilience but offered limited support for livelihood restoration, land redistribution, or structural transformation. Temporary settlements were frequently established on landlords' land or in environmentally insecure locations, reinforcing dependency. Similar limitations characterised the World Bank's Sindh Flood Emergency Rehabilitation Project,⁵⁶ whose implementation depended heavily on provincial bureaucracies, landlords, and local intermediaries embedded within Sindh's unequal agrarian order. Fieldwork confirmed that Dalit Hindus, Dalit Christians, and Pasmanda Muslim communities engaged in caste-coded occupations were often excluded from beneficiary lists or received assistance only after dominant-caste households. Landlords frequently secured housing grants and livelihood packages for relatives and political clients before historically marginalised families were considered. Families occupying flood-damaged *kutch*a houses without legal land titles often remained ineligible for

⁵⁵ Datta, S and Mehra, R, 'The Impact of Lending to Women on Household Vulnerability and Women's Empowerment: Evidence from India' (2008) 36(12) *World Development* 2620–2642; Kaur, S, et al, 'How Many and Which Women Own Land in India? Inter-gender and Intra-gender Gaps' (2021) *Journal of Development Studies* 1.

⁵⁶ World Bank, *Project Paper on a Proposed Additional Credit in the Amount of JPY 22.398 Billion (US\$150 Million Equivalent) to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for the Sindh Flood Emergency Rehabilitation Project* (Report No PP00011, International Development Association, World Bank 2025).

housing compensation. Without caste-disaggregated data, effective accountability mechanisms, or meaningful participation by Dalit and Pasmanda communities, reconstruction risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to overcome. Administrative categories such as beneficiaries, affected households, and vulnerable communities flatten historically differentiated social relations into universal classifications of need. Rather than transforming the social foundations of environmental vulnerability, post-disaster governance frequently restores the unequal relations through which that vulnerability is continually reproduced.

6. *Bureaucracies of Humiliation*

By seven o'clock in the morning, hundreds of women had already gathered outside a Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) payment centre. Under the intensifying summer heat, what officials described as a queue was, in practice, an ever-shifting crowd. Women pushed towards the payment desk before the day's cash ran out or the computer system failed again. As the hours passed, elderly women stumbled in the crush, several fainted from dehydration and exhaustion, and others collapsed after standing for hours beneath the scorching Sindh sun. With no ambulance, medical team, or nearby health facility, those who lost consciousness were carried away by relatives or strangers while the crowd closed behind them and the struggle for payment resumed.

Such scenes were common across Larkana, Dadu, and Khairpur during my fieldwork. Bagri, Bheel, Bazigar, Jogi, and other lower-caste women repeatedly described collecting BISP payments as one of the most degrading experiences of their lives. Their greatest hardship was not travelling long distances or waiting for hours but the humiliation through which welfare itself was administered. Shielding their faces with dupattas while clutching CNICs and payment slips wrapped in plastic against dust and sweat, women rushed forward whenever officials opened the gate before settling into yet another prolonged wait. One Bagri woman, after spending an entire morning outside a payment centre, remarked:

It is shameful that we have to come here like this just to receive a little money. Women from Sayyed and Abro families receive their payments at home. Their men collect the money on their behalf. But we have to stand here under the sun for hours. Sometimes our

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turn comes; sometimes it does not.

Others described the experience as *beizzati* (humiliation) and the loss of *izzat* (honour and dignity). Watching from a distance, an elderly Pasmanda man reflected:

Our women never had to suffer such humiliation before. But what choice do we have? We endure this ordeal for a few thousand rupees because there is no other way.

These accounts reflected a broader pattern rather than isolated incidents. In June 2023, a stampede at a BISP payment centre in Karachi hospitalised more than twenty women after nearly two thousand participants, having waited for hours in extreme heat, surged towards the entrance when payments began.⁵⁷ Officials framed the incident as a logistical failure. Respondents instead understood it as exposing how welfare itself was administered through bodily exhaustion, public exposure, and institutional humiliation. Rather than mitigating vulnerability, payment distribution became another arena through which caste, class, and gender inequalities were reproduced.

These ethnographic accounts show that humanitarian assistance is experienced not simply through cash transfers but through the institutions governing access to them. Registration, verification, biometric authentication, payment collection, and beneficiary monitoring determine who waits, who suffers, who is recognised, and under what conditions assistance is received. The repeated invocation of *izzat* (dignity) and *beizzati* (humiliation) suggests that welfare was experienced less as a right of citizenship than as a difficult and often degrading encounter with state institutions. Administrative procedures that appear universal become deeply unequal when implemented within caste- and gender-differentiated social worlds.

Access to welfare therefore depends on navigating administrative procedures that require repeated verification of poverty, vulnerability, and eligibility. Participants described these processes as time-consuming, uncertain, and often humiliating, particularly when officials questioned their claims, delayed payments, or demanded additional documentation.

⁵⁷ 'At Least 21 Women Hospitalised as Stampede Mars BISP Disbursement in Karachi' *The Express Tribune* (26 June 2023) <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2423638/at-least-21-women-hospitalised-as-stampede-mars-bisp-disbursement-in-karachi>> accessed 10 June 2025.

In this way, bureaucratic procedures do more than determine eligibility; they shape how historically marginalised communities experience recognition, dignity, and their relationship with the state. Humanitarian governance thus distributes not only material assistance but also unequal experiences of respect, shame, and belonging. Razzaq Solangi of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum in Badin, who worked extensively with flood-affected communities, described the experience succinctly:

One thousand rupees are deducted by the clerk from every quarterly payment. It is illegal and corrupt. But even worse is the humiliation of our women, who are forced to jostle and push their way to the payment counter. Sometimes they are even beaten while standing in line to receive the money.

Across Larkana, Dadu, and Khairpur, Bagri, Bheel, Bazigar, and Jogi households likewise described exclusion from beneficiary lists, delayed payments, repeated document verification, and informal deductions imposed by brokers responsible for registration. Politically connected landlords and intermediaries often secured compensation for relatives and clients, while poorer Dalit and Pasmanda households struggled to establish eligibility despite suffering equal or greater losses. Programmes that appeared universal were therefore implemented through entrenched relations of caste, patronage, and bureaucratic discretion. These inequalities extended beyond financial corruption. Women endured overcrowded payment centres, arbitrary deductions, and negotiations with officials and intermediaries while struggling to preserve their dignity in intensely public settings. These encounters were also profoundly gendered. Although welfare programmes formally recognised women as beneficiaries, administrative recognition rarely translated into substantive autonomy. Women frequently relied on male relatives, brokers, or officials to complete registration, resolve documentation problems, travel to payment centres, or challenge administrative exclusions. Gender-sensitive policy design thus coexisted with bureaucratic practices reproducing both patriarchal and caste hierarchies. One Bagri woman from Larkana expressed this contradiction powerfully:

I am poor and in need. My husband is alive, but he is disabled and cannot work. Still, they do not believe me. Is it not enough for a woman—who has never begged, neither from the government nor from

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strangers—to tell them this much? How much humiliation must I endure, as a woman from a Bagri community, just to receive a small amount of government assistance?

Another Bagri woman explained that the greatest burden lay not in the amount of assistance but in the conditions attached to receiving it. Access to support required repeatedly translating deeply personal experiences of poverty, disability, and caste discrimination into bureaucratic proof. Recognition depended not simply on deprivation but on the continual demonstration of vulnerability before administrative authorities. An Oad woman from Dadu made the same point more starkly:

They give us money as if we are beggars, not citizens. We cannot even hide our caste to escape discrimination because they already know who we are from our identity cards.

Her observation captures the moral economy of humanitarian bureaucracy. Poverty had to be publicly performed through documents, biometric verification, repeated interviews, and long hours of waiting before assistance became available. What appeared administratively as an objective verification process was experienced instead as an unequal moral relationship in which historically marginalised communities repeatedly proved both their poverty and their worthiness.

These ethnographic accounts expose dimensions of humanitarian governance largely absent from official monitoring systems. Administrative evaluations measure beneficiaries, payments, reconstruction, and programme efficiency, yet cannot capture how welfare is experienced through waiting, uncertainty, documentation, discretionary power, and humiliation.³⁸ Nor do they address how humanitarian reason recognises suffering while remaining detached from the inequalities producing it.³⁹ For Dalit and Pasmanda women, access to welfare required repeated public performances of poverty and dependency before institutions largely indifferent to the caste and gendered conditions shaping their lives. Collectively produced inequalities disappeared from administrative

³⁸ Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Duke University Press 2012).

³⁹ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (University of California Press 2012).

reasoning only to reappear as individual tests of deservingness. Women were compelled to prove poverty rather than claim justice, demonstrate vulnerability rather than assert citizenship, and seek recognition as beneficiaries rather than rights-bearing citizens. Bureaucracies of humiliation thus transform structural inequalities into individual administrative cases, enabling humanitarian governance to reproduce caste while appearing universally impartial.

7. Reproductive Injustice

Environmental crises reproduce caste not only through unequal access to humanitarian assistance but also through the conditions under which everyday life is sustained. Caring for children and older people, securing food and water, maintaining households, accessing healthcare, and sustaining kinship all become more difficult as environmental disruption erodes livelihoods and damages infrastructure.

Because these activities are already organised through gendered divisions of labour and caste hierarchies, disasters deepen rather than suspend existing inequalities. As feminist scholarship on social reproduction⁶⁰ and political ecology,⁶¹ has shown, environmental crises are experienced through the unequal organisation of everyday care and reproductive labour. In Sindh, these dynamics reveal a form of reproductive injustice: the unequal capacity of historically marginalised communities to sustain everyday life under conditions of environmental disruption. A Bagri mother living in a temporary settlement in Dadu illustrated these inequalities through her experience of childbirth:

Usually, women in our paaro (kinship group) give birth

⁶⁰ Sharmila Rege, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of "Difference" and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position' (1998) 33(44) *Economic and Political Weekly* WS39–WS46; Kalpana Kannabiran and Devi Jagani, *Gendered Bodies and Worlds of Labour: Re-Conceptualising Dignity after Puttaswamy vs. Union of India* (Zubaan 2024); Tithi Bhattacharya (ed), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press 2017); Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press 2012); Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care' (2016) 100 *New Left Review* 99.

⁶¹ Elaine Enarson and PG Dhar Chakrabarti (eds), *Women, Gender and Disaster: Global Issues and Initiatives* (SAGE Publications India 2009); Seema Arora-Jonsson, 'Virtue and Vulnerability: Discourses on Women, Gender and Climate Change' (2011) 21(2) *Global Environmental Change* 744.

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at home with the help of a community midwife. It is not that we cannot go to the government hospital, but they never treat us the way they treat women from the omnichi zaat (privileged castes). My grandmother was our community midwife, but she died only a few weeks before the monsoon began. When the floods came, it became impossible to reach another midwife from our community because all the roads were under water. We just waited.

The nearest maternity facility remained inaccessible for weeks, while her family lacked both the financial resources to hire private transport and the social connections needed to obtain emergency assistance. Quietly, she concluded:

The baby survived, but I thought I would die because there was no care after the delivery.

Her account demonstrates how environmental disaster transformed a familiar community-based practice into a life-threatening struggle, exposing unequal geographies of healthcare, mobility, and social support. Similar experiences emerged across Larkana, Dadu, and Khairpur. Activists, health workers, and community members described deteriorating maternal healthcare following repeated floods and prolonged displacement. Women reported declining access to trained birth attendants, antenatal care, emergency obstetric services, maternal nutrition, and safe delivery facilities, while reproductive infections, untreated miscarriages, anaemia, malnutrition, and psychological distress became increasingly common in temporary settlements where sanitation had collapsed and clean water remained scarce. Dalit and Pasmānda activists also described discriminatory treatment in public hospitals, where women frequently encountered delayed care, neglect, or pressure to seek treatment in private facilities beyond their means. Healthcare therefore emerged not simply as a site of medical intervention but as an institution through which caste organised the reproduction of life itself.

Environmental disruption also intensified women's unpaid reproductive labour. Damage to homes, water systems, sanitation, and farmland expanded responsibilities for collecting water and fuel, securing food, caring for dependants, and maintaining households. Women described longer journeys for water, overcrowded shelters, and increasing caregiving burdens, while disaster recovery programmes largely prioritised

infrastructure reconstruction and financial compensation over the labour required to sustain everyday life. Respondents also expressed growing anxiety over daughters' safety, interrupted schooling, declining employment opportunities, and shrinking future prospects after repeated displacement. Several families explained that worsening economic insecurity encouraged earlier marriages as a strategy to reduce household expenditure and strengthen kinship support. As one Machi (fisherman) father in Khairpur observed:

When there is no work, no harvest, and no certainty about tomorrow, parents begin thinking that at least a daughter may find some security in her husband's home.

A father from the semi-nomadic Jaabloo Brohi community similarly explained why his sixteen-year-old daughter married soon after the floods:

We could no longer feed everyone. Marriage was not what we wanted. It was what we could still afford. After all, we are mamas to everyone.

Referring to the familiar proverb describing Brohis as the “maternal uncles of everyone,” he underscored how climatic disaster intensified rather than created the economic pressures encouraging early marriage. The Sindh case extends feminist theories of social reproduction and feminist political ecology by demonstrating that reproductive labour in caste-structured societies is inseparable from relations of social exclusion embedded in welfare, infrastructure, and public institutions. The Sindh case shows that social reproduction is historically organised through caste relations that determine whose lives are protected, whose labour remains invisible, and whose futures become increasingly precarious. It therefore extends feminist theories of social reproduction⁶² by demonstrating that reproductive labour in caste-structured societies is inseparable from entrenched relations of social exclusion. It also broadens feminist political ecology by showing that environmental governance is shaped not only by gendered relations of labour and vulnerability but also by caste-based

⁶² Kannabiran and Jagani, *Gendered Bodies and Worlds of Labour* (n 60); Bhattacharya (ed), *Social Reproduction Theory* (n 60); Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (n 60); Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care' (n 60).

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inequalities embedded in welfare, infrastructure, and public institutions.⁶³ Climate justice, therefore, cannot be reduced to infrastructure, adaptation, or humanitarian relief alone. It must also transform the unequal organisation of social reproduction through which caste is reproduced across generations. In doing so, the Sindh case extends environmental justice scholarship⁶⁴ by demonstrating that caste constitutes a fundamental axis of climate injustice that remains largely absent from prevailing theories of environmental governance and climate justice.

Environmental disruption also produced profound psychosocial consequences that remained largely invisible within humanitarian assessments. Dalit activists in Tharparkar and Dadu described a disturbing rise in suicides following successive years of drought, livelihood insecurity, and post-flood displacement. According to Ranshal Kolhi, more than 120 people—many of them women—died by suicide in 2022 alone, reflecting what he described as an “epidemic of despair.” Activists stressed, however, that these deaths could not be attributed to climate change alone. While some reflected drought-induced poverty and indebtedness, others were closely tied to entrenched caste and patriarchal norms surrounding love, inter-caste marriage, and family honour. Some deaths officially recorded as suicides were widely believed to conceal honour killings. These accounts extend the concept of reproductive injustice beyond unequal access to healthcare, food, water, and care work to encompass the unequal conditions under which dignity, bodily autonomy, mental well-being, and life itself are sustained, reproduced.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the central problem of environmental governance in Pakistan is not simply the unequal distribution of environmental harms, but the unequal production of political visibility. Climate governance does not merely encounter pre-existing vulnerable populations and distribute assistance among them; through assessments,

⁶³ Enarson and Dhar Chakrabarti (eds), *Women, Gender and Disaster* (n 61); Arora-Jonsson, 'Virtue and Vulnerability' (n 61).

⁶⁴ Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises' (2018) 1(1–2) *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 224; Laura Pulido, 'Racism and the Anthropocene' in Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero and Robert S Emmett (eds), *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene* (University of Chicago Press 2018) 116.

registries, classifications, and programmes of relief and reconstruction, it helps determine which forms of vulnerability become visible, measurable, and governable. In Sindh, these ostensibly universal bureaucratic practices operate within social worlds already structured by unequal relations of land, labour, caste, gender, and political authority. They therefore do not suspend caste in favour of humanitarian universality. Rather, they can reproduce caste inequality while rendering caste itself increasingly difficult to name within the administrative languages through which environmental suffering is recognised.

The concept of governed invisibility captures this institutional paradox. Building on scholarship on eco-casteism, Dalit ecologies, climate justice, humanitarian governance, and the anthropology of the state, the article has shifted attention from demonstrating that caste structures environmental inequality to examining how caste becomes obscured within the institutions charged with governing that inequality. What we describe as climate caste blindness is one manifestation of this broader process: caste remains consequential in determining exposure to environmental hazards, access to land and infrastructure, eligibility for relief, experiences of bureaucratic institutions, and possibilities for recovery, even when it is absent from the official categories through which these processes are understood. The ethnographic evidence shows that such invisibility is therefore not equivalent to social disappearance. On the contrary, caste can remain materially powerful precisely while being administratively unrecognised.

In Pakistan, this process operates through four overlapping regimes of political legibility: Sindhi nationalist political Sufism, state-driven political Islam, humanitarian-development governance, and local feudal-caste authority. These regimes differ in their histories, institutional locations, and political vocabularies, but together they help explain how caste can remain socially operative while becoming politically and bureaucratically obscured. Regional solidarity can subordinate internal hierarchy to a larger Sindhi identity; Islamic egalitarianism can make caste among Muslims difficult to acknowledge; humanitarian institutions can translate historically constituted inequalities into categories of poverty, vulnerability, displacement, resilience, and need; and local landlords, political brokers, religious authorities, and other intermediaries can continue to organise access to resources through caste and patronage. Governed invisibility emerges from the interaction of these regimes rather than from any single institutional failure.

The ethnographic consequences of this process extend well beyond the distribution of emergency relief. They appear in settlement on

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environmentally precarious land, dependence on landlords and intermediaries, exclusion from compensation, experiences of waiting and humiliation within welfare bureaucracies, displacement without secure recognition, and the unequal burdens of care and social reproduction borne by women. Such experiences demonstrate why environmental vulnerability cannot be understood solely through exposure to climatic hazards or deficiencies in technical preparedness. Floods, drainage failures, salinisation, declining fisheries, displacement, and disrupted healthcare become socially differentiated crises because they encounter inequalities that precede the disaster itself. Climate events intensify these relations; they do not create them.

The argument has implications beyond Pakistan. Contemporary environmental governance often approaches inequality as a problem that can be corrected through improved targeting, more refined vulnerability indicators, better data, and greater inclusion. These measures may be necessary, but they raise a more fundamental question: which histories and forms of social difference can administrative systems recognise in the first place? Classification is never politically neutral. Categories make particular forms of suffering actionable while potentially detaching them from the relations through which they were produced. Where caste operates across religious boundaries and is intertwined with landownership, labour, settlement, gender, and political mediation, administrative recognition of poverty or vulnerability alone cannot explain why some populations repeatedly become more exposed, receive assistance later, recover more slowly, or encounter the state under more degrading conditions.

The enduring significance of caste lies in this paradox: it can remain indispensable to the organisation of environmental life while disappearing from the administrative vocabularies through which that life is governed. Making these institutional processes visible is therefore essential if climate and disaster governance are to move beyond managing the consequences of vulnerability towards confronting the historically embedded social relations that make particular populations disproportionately vulnerable long before disasters occur.