

Policy and the People: A Sociological Analysis of Government Relief and Rehabilitation Measures during Natural Disasters in India

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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters have increasingly impacted India over the past decades, causing widespread human, economic, and social losses. Despite significant investments in relief and rehabilitation through the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF), State Disaster Response Funds (SDRF), and other programs, disparities in accessibility, efficiency, and equity persist. Marginalized communities, including low-income groups, women, and certain caste populations, often face systemic barriers in receiving timely support. The study recognizes the need to examine disaster management not only from a policy and fund allocation perspective but also through the lens of people's lived experiences and sociological implications. The present research aims to analyze how government relief and rehabilitation measures are implemented and perceived by affected populations in India. The study has three primary objectives: (1) to assess the allocation and disbursement of disaster relief funds at the central and state levels; (2) to examine accessibility, equity, and inclusivity of relief measures for marginalized communities; and (3) to identify gaps between policy intentions and field-level implementation, offering recommendations for improvement. A quantitative and qualitative methodology was employed, relying mainly on secondary data from government reports (MHA, NDMA, NDRF/SDRF records), published statistics, displacement reports, and academic literature. Where available, qualitative accounts from NGOs and research papers were included to understand the sociological dimensions of disaster response. The findings indicate that while fund allocations have increased in recent years, delays in disbursement, uneven implementation, and socio-economic inequities remain significant challenges. Relief measures often reach urban and accessible populations faster than remote or marginalized communities. Displacement, mental health, and livelihood restoration continue to be under-addressed, revealing gaps in holistic rehabilitation. The study concludes that disaster management in India requires integrated, people-centered approaches that combine timely relief with equitable and socially sensitive rehabilitation. It underscores the importance of monitoring, accountability, and inclusive policy design to enhance both efficiency and trust in government interventions.

Keywords: Disaster Relief, Rehabilitation Policy, Sociological Analysis, Vulnerable Populations & Government Response.

Introduction

India is widely recognized as one of the world's most disaster-prone nations, subject to floods, cyclones, droughts, landslides, heat waves, and other climactic extremes. Recent decades have witnessed not only a persistence of such hazards but also an intensification in their frequency and severity, owing partly to climate change and evolving land-use patterns (Sharma 2021). The cumulative effect of repeated shocks places enormous stress on communities and infrastructure alike, rendering many regions perennially vulnerable.

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The toll of disasters in India is not limited to material destruction: the human cost remains high. Livelihoods are uprooted, displacement becomes recurrent, and social fabrics fray under prolonged stress. For instance, studies show that disaster exposure is significantly associated with declines in self-rated health, functional limitations, and mental health stresses among older Indians (Muhammad et al. 2024). In other words, disasters not only kill or displace, but also impair people's capacity to rebuild and live with dignity.

In response, the Indian state has erected a legal and institutional architecture aimed at relief and rehabilitation. The Disaster Management Act of 2005 laid the foundation for this arrangement, enabling the creation of the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and mandating State Disaster Response Funds (SDRF) as core instruments of fiscal support (Hanspal 2025; PRS India 2023). These instruments are designed not only for immediate relief but also for bridging the gap toward medium- to long-term rehabilitation.

Yet the gap between allocation and impact is often wide. Even as central assistance is sanctioned, the challenge remains to channel those resources in ways that align with ground realities. The National Disaster Mitigation Fund, newer frameworks, and policy tweaks have sought to introduce resilience and preparedness components over and above relief disbursement, but actual implementation across regions remains uneven (Disaster Management in India 2022; Sharma 2021).

Empirical data illustrate this tension. In February 2025, the central government approved ₹1,554.99 crore in additional NDRF assistance to several states affected by floods, landslides, and cyclonic storms (Press Information Bureau 2025). Meanwhile, official norms stipulate that central assistance under the NDRF can only supplement SDRF funds when disaster severity exceeds the SDRF's capacity (PRS India 2023). Such conditionalities, though intended to ensure prudence, sometimes slow down the flow of aid.

Implementation challenges abound. Delays in fund release, differences in assessment of damage, weak or disrupted infrastructure in remote areas, and the absence of clarity in guidelines often hamper timely relief. Scholars have noted that many policy frameworks falter at the sub-national level due to administrative fragmentation and lack of coordination among central, state, and local authorities (A Critical Review of India's Disaster Management Framework 2025; Exploring the Gap between Policy and Action 2021).

From a sociological lens, the story cannot be told merely through numbers. How relief reaches or fails to reach different communities—along lines of caste, class, gender, and locality—shapes not only recovery but also social trust in the state. The concept of social capital (bonding, bridging, linking) is often invoked to explain how community networks mediate post-disaster recovery (Behera et al. 2023). Yet access to “linking” capital—the connections to institutions of power—tends to be unequally distributed, reinforcing structural inequalities.

Disasters frequently engender internal displacement, compelling populations to migrate temporarily or permanently. While aggregated displacement figures are sometimes reported, the heterogeneity of those experiences remains under-studied. In regions with frequent calamities, migration becomes adaptive, but also fraught with new vulnerabilities. The loss of social cohesion, dislocation from ancestral lands, and the psychological cost of uprooting demand deeper inquiry.

Regionally, disaster risk and state capacity are unevenly matched. Coastal states (Odisha, Andhra Pradesh) have developed more institutional infrastructure to respond to cyclones and floods; Himalayan and northeastern states grapple with landslides, flash floods, and sparse accessibility. Comparative studies highlight that policy directives from the national level often get filtered through layers of local bureaucracy, resulting in incremental rather than transformative change (Few 2023; Exploring the Gap between Policy and Action 2021).

Relief measures are short-term by design, but rehabilitation and preparedness must inevitably carry the burden of long time horizons. Infrastructure repair, livelihood restoration, early warning systems, and community resilience building are essential complements to immediate relief. Yet such components often remain under-resourced or postponed in favor of urgent relief outlays (Disaster Management in India 2022; Exploring Disaster Mitigation in India 2021).

Even when policy is well crafted, implementation gaps persist. Bureaucratic inertia, lack of clarity in guidelines, weak monitoring and evaluation, and politicization of relief funds undermine available frameworks. More critically, social and psychological needs—such as community rebuilding,

psychosocial support, or relocation from high risk zones—often lie outside the purview of conventional relief programs.

Disasters also tend to exacerbate existing inequalities: vulnerable castes, tribal groups, women, landless households often inhabit marginal lands or flood-prone zones, and find it harder to access formal relief mechanisms. Scholars caution that unless equity is explicitly built into disaster policies, relief regimes risk reinforcing rather than alleviating social disparities (Kaushik et al. 2024; Joseph 2021).

Given the scale of disasters, the frequency of human suffering, displacement and economic loss, and given sizeable government efforts through NDRF, SDRF, mitigation funds, there remains a critical gap in knowledge about how these policies are actually experienced on the ground — by different social groups, in different regions — and to what extent relief and rehabilitation are equitable, timely, and effective. This study is needed to bridge that gap, by putting together recent data and sociological insights, to inform policy reforms that not only respond to disasters, but do so in ways that enhance social justice, legitimacy, and human well-being.

Review of Literature

S. No.	Author(s)	Year	Research Objective(s)	Key Findings
1	Piyush Tiwari & Jyoti Shukla & Anjana Purkayastha	2023	To examine determinants of well-being of persons affected by disasters, via post-disaster reconstruction in Chennai, comparing pre- and post-disaster capabilities of households in resettlement colonies. SAGE Journals	Found that 58% of households felt their post-resettlement living conditions were no better than before (living in informal settlements). Mechanisms for community participation, inclusive response involving women and marginalized households were not well incorporated. Rehabilitation responses were ad hoc and reactive. The study highlighted gaps in long-term planning, in rebuilding more than physical assets (i.e. social infrastructure, livelihoods). SAGE Journals
2	Arindam Biswas	2019	To review post-disaster temporary housing strategies in India, with comparisons to Indonesia and Japan, focusing on how temporary housing supports physical and mental healing, adequacy of institutional responses. OUCI+1	Revealed that India's temporary housing often suffers from delays, poor living conditions; that occupants stay in temporary shelters longer than needed; mental health, dignity, and socio-cultural appropriateness are often neglected. Compared to Indonesia and Japan, Indian plans are less systematic, less community-participatory. OUCI+1
3	Sangram Kishor Patel, Gopal Agrawal, Bincy Mathew	2020	To synthesize what is known about resilience and mental health impacts of natural disasters in India, via a narrative review. accscience.com	Found that disasters impose high psychological burdens—anxiety, PTSD, depression are common, especially in vulnerable populations. Mental health interventions are under-evaluated, under-resourced. Also, resilience is uneven, linked with social support, prior experience, socioeconomic status. accscience.com
4	Study "A District-level Flood Severity Index for Flood Management in India" (Saharia, Jain, Prakash, Malik, Sreejith, Joshi)	2024	To develop a flood severity index (DFSI) at district level, based on historical data of floods, damage, population affected, to assist flood management planning. arXiv	Introduced a novel index (DFSI) combining metrics of historical flood-affected area, duration, number of people impacted. Found that many districts have been under-recognized in flood severity assessments. The index helps prioritize districts for mitigation and relief. Found that using this index, policy makers can better direct resources to high-severity areas. arXiv
5	Amit Kapoor	2023	To explore disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies in India's most vulnerable regions, and to examine how vulnerability can be reduced through risk	Identified that despite policy pronouncements, many vulnerable regions lack capacity (infrastructure, personnel) for DRR. Non-structural measures (awareness, early warning, community training) are often weaker than structural ones. Climate change exacerbates risk, making existing DRR measures

			management and resilience building. aimjournals.com	less effective. Emphasized need for integrated risk reduction in planning, better hazard mapping, capacity building. aimjournals.com
6	Editors Sharma, V. R., & Chandrakanta	2024	In <i>Making India Disaster Resilient: Challenges and Future Perspectives</i> : To collate case studies, recent data to analyse what works and what doesn't in disaster management in India; identify key challenges & future perspectives. SpringerLink	Found that awareness is increasing among communities but institutional mechanisms still lag in many states. Notable gaps in preparedness, especially for "compound disasters" (multiple hazards), and in integrating disaster risk reduction with urban planning. Maps and case studies revealed that local governance, local participation matter greatly in successful disaster resilience. Emphasis on scaling up mitigation, early warning, insurance, and mainstreaming disaster resilience in all sectors. SpringerLink
7	Akanchha Singh	2023	To evaluate structural reconstruction practices in housing reconstruction across India; examine how housing reconstruction aligns with resilience and needs of affected people. SpringerLink	Found that housing reconstruction often emphasizes physical / structural safety, but less attention is paid to location, cultural appropriateness or community preferences. Design-quality of houses variable; infrastructure around reconstructed housing (roads, water, sanitation, connectivity) often lags. Also highlighted delays, cost overruns, and sometimes inadequate supervision of reconstruction quality. SpringerLink
8	Mittul Vahanvati, Elizabeth Maly, Titaya Sararit	2025	In <i>Resilient Recovery from Disasters</i> (India, Thailand, Japan): To compare long-term outcomes of post-disaster housing reconstruction in three countries; understand what helps recovery to be resilient. SpringerLink	Found that reconstruction is more resilient when it is people-centred, allowing affected persons to have a say in design, location, material, and when non-housing dimensions (livelihoods, social infrastructure, community bonds) are restored. The book shows that in India, often recovery fades after initial rebuilding; long-term follow up, maintenance, socio-economic recovery are weaker. Also, cross-country comparison shows that Japan and Thailand had stronger institutional capacity and pre-existing disaster culture. SpringerLink
9	"Studying Policy Changes in Disaster Management in India: A Tale of Two Cyclones"	2016	To critically analyze how India's disaster management policy shifted over time, comparing the Odisha Super Cyclone (1999) and Cyclone Phailin (2013), in terms of preparedness, response, early warning, community participation, etc. Cambridge University Press & Assessment	The study showed that by 2013, India had significantly improved ability to forecast, issue early warnings, evacuate people, reduce mortality (Phailin had far fewer deaths than the 1999 cyclone). Also, non-structural measures (awareness, community participation) improved. But economic loss was still large; gaps persisted in preparedness, recovery, gender-sensitive policies. Suggests that policy reforms post-2005 have had effect, but implementation is uneven. Cambridge University Press & Assessment
10	"Flood Management in India: A Focussed Review on the Current Status and Future Challenges"	2020	To appraise the current status of flood management in India—what structural and non-structural measures exist, what challenges are there, and future directions. ScienceDirect	Found that despite large investment, many flood management programmes suffer from poor maintenance of structural infrastructure (e.g. embankments, drainage), weak enforcement in non-structural zones, inadequate integration with urban planning, and climate change making historical flood data less reliable. Also, many flood management schemes are reactive, not proactive, and missing sufficient local/community participation. Future challenges include rising rainfall intensity, need for better data, insurance mechanisms, transboundary river cooperation

Government Report Literature Analysis

Recent government reports provide a comprehensive overview of disaster relief and rehabilitation measures in India. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA, 2025) reported that the Central Government released a total of ₹18,322.80 crore to 27 states under the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) and an additional ₹4,808.30 crore from the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) to 18 states during the 2024–25 fiscal year. Further, an extra ₹1,554.99 crore was sanctioned as NDRF support to five states—Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, Odisha, Telangana, and Tripura—for flood, landslide, and cyclone relief, highlighting the government's increased fiscal commitment to disaster management (PIB, 2025).

The Annual Report of the MHA (2024) provides a detailed account of disaster occurrences, fund allocations, and state-level disbursements, emphasizing the institutional framework governing disaster response. It underscores the responsibilities shared between central and state authorities, as well as the legal and administrative mechanisms established under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (MHA, 2024). Complementing this, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA, 2024) annual report outlines guidelines issued for various types of disasters, advisory dissemination, capacity-building programs, and post-disaster stress management initiatives. These reports collectively indicate a structured and increasingly proactive policy approach.

The Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC, 2024) India Country Report reinforces the need for enhanced disaster risk reduction, noting the growing frequency of extreme weather events and highlighting gaps in institutional preparedness, particularly in flood and drought management. Similarly, NIDM's Annual Report (2024) documents extensive training, workshops, and research efforts aimed at strengthening disaster preparedness at the local, state, and national levels, reflecting a focus on capacity building and knowledge dissemination.

In terms of policy evolution, the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024 as tracked by PRS India, proposes additional responsibilities for NDMA and SDMAs, including preparation of centralized disaster databases, post-disaster audits, and enhanced monitoring of preparedness measures (PRS India, 2024). Financial structuring is also addressed in the NDRMF policy framework, which earmarks significant funds for mitigation activities, modernization of fire services, and resettlement of displaced populations due to erosion or other hazards (NDMI, 2023).

Finally, the NDMA has issued detailed guidelines for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in disaster contexts, establishing standard operating procedures and institutional roles to address the often-overlooked psychosocial impacts of disasters (NDMA, 2024). Collectively, these government reports provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into India's disaster management mechanisms, highlighting achievements in fund allocation and structural preparedness, while also revealing persistent gaps in inclusivity, timely disbursement, and long-term rehabilitation planning.

Research Gaps

- **Limited Sociological Insight into Policy Implementation:** While government reports and academic studies provide data on fund allocations, relief disbursement, and disaster incidence, there is limited research on how these policies are perceived and experienced by affected communities, particularly marginalized groups (Kaushik et al., 2024; Joseph, 2021).
- **Inadequate Analysis of Equity and Inclusivity:** Existing studies often overlook social dimensions such as caste, class, gender, and regional disparities in access to relief and rehabilitation. The differential impact of disaster policies on vulnerable populations remains under-explored (Few, 2023; Sharma, 2021).
- **Scarcity of Integrated Evaluation of Relief, Rehabilitation, and Mitigation:** Most research and reports focus either on immediate relief or long-term rehabilitation, but rarely examine the effectiveness, gaps, and interlinkages among relief, rehabilitation, and disaster mitigation strategies in a single framework (Hanspal, 2025; NDMA, 2024).

Thus, given these research gaps, this study seeks to systematically examine the relationship between government disaster policies and the experiences of affected populations in India. It aims to provide a sociological analysis of how relief and rehabilitation measures are implemented, received, and perceived across different social groups, highlighting inequities and gaps in effectiveness. By integrating secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and qualitative accounts, the research addresses both the technical and social dimensions of disaster management. Therefore, the present

study is undertaken under the title: "**Policy and the People: A Sociological Analysis of Government Relief and Rehabilitation Measures during Natural Disasters in India.**"

Research Objectives

- To examine the scope, scale and patterns of government relief and rehabilitation measures (allocations, disbursements etc.) in recent natural disasters in India.
- To analyze how these relief and rehabilitation measures are experienced by different social groups (e.g. by region, class, caste, gender), assessing equity, access, and barriers.
- To identify gaps between policy/planning and implementation in relief & rehabilitation, and propose suggestions for improving effectiveness, responsiveness, and social justice.

Research Methodology

This study was based primarily on secondary data analysis, supplemented with qualitative accounts where available.

- **Data Sources** included government reports (Ministry of Home Affairs, NDMA, NDRF/SDRF records), published data from reputable sources, displacement data from organisations such as the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), and statutory disclosures. Academic papers and NGO reports containing qualitative interviews about people's experiences were also utilized.
- **Time period:** The study focused on recent years, roughly from 2022 to 2025, to capture relevant policy developments and disaster events.
- **Analytic approach:** For Objective 1, quantitative data on disaster events, allocated funds (NDRF, SDRF, other schemes), disbursements, number of people affected, displaced, and casualties were collected and tabulated state-wise and by disaster type. For Objective 2, where available, secondary and qualitative reports were examined to assess the extent of relief received by marginalized groups, barriers faced, and patterns of differential access. For Objective 3, policy documents were reviewed to compare intended norms versus actual practices, case examples of implementation gaps were analyzed, and key policy shortcomings and suggestions were identified.
- **Limitations:** Secondary data were sometimes incomplete, with limited disaggregation by social groups. Qualitative accounts were occasionally anecdotal, and reporting bias in secondary sources could not be ruled out. Discrepancies across data sources were also observed.

Findings of the Study

Below are the findings organized by the three objectives. Wherever possible with tables and interpretation.

Findings of Objective 1: Scope, Scale and Patterns of Government Relief & Rehabilitation Measures

The structure of disaster relief and rehabilitation in India is rooted in a state-centric welfare paradigm, where the government is seen as the primary actor responsible for protecting citizens during crises (Joseph, 2021). The frameworks developed through the Disaster Management Act (2005) reflect a hierarchical, institutionalized approach that channels funds from the Centre to states through mechanisms like the NDRF and SDRF. From a functionalist perspective, these measures are intended to restore social equilibrium by addressing disruptions caused by natural calamities. However, critics argue that the actual functioning of these systems reflects more of a bureaucratic, technocratic governance model than a socially responsive one (Sharma, 2021).

Furthermore, the literature on disaster governance (Few, 2023; Hanspal, 2025) indicates a pattern of fiscal centralization in fund allocation and a strong emphasis on short-term relief rather than long-term resilience. While the state designs policies and allocates significant resources for disaster management, there remains a gap in translating macro-level financial flows into micro-level outcomes for affected populations. Theoretical models such as the "policy-practice gap" and "top-down disaster governance" suggest that while funding structures appear comprehensive on paper, their operational efficiency often depends on state capacity, political will, and local governance mechanisms.

In sociological terms, relief and rehabilitation measures are not just economic transactions but mechanisms through which the state re-establishes legitimacy during crises. They act as a form of state-

citizen engagement, where timely and adequate responses strengthen trust, while bureaucratic inertia and inefficiencies may delegitimize authority (Behera et al., 2023). Thus, the pattern and scope of relief distribution offer critical insights into how disaster policy operates as a tool of both governance and social reproduction.

Table 1: Recent Allocations under NDRF / SDRF / Related Funds (2023-2025)

Year	Fund / Body	Total Allocation / Sanctioned Release	Number of States	Major Disasters Covered	Notes
2023 Jan-Jun	SDRF release to 19 States	₹6,194.40 crore	19	Monsoon flood seasons, etc. <i>The Hindu</i>	Central share; for 2022-23 & 2023-24 periods
2024	Additional NDRF aid to 5 states	₹1,554.99 crore	5	Floods, flash floods, landslides, cyclonic storms <i>Jagranjosh.com+1</i>	Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, Odisha, Telangana, Tripura
2024-25 (so far)	Sanctions under all disaster funds (NDRF, SDRF, etc.)	₹12,554 crore	several states	For relief, rehabilitation, mitigation, fire services etc. <i>Business Standard</i>	Covering multiple disaster types and mitigation schemes

Interpretation

- The data show that central allocations are substantial and multiple funds are active. The SDRF remains a core mechanism for immediate relief via state governments, with large releases during monsoon seasons.
- The NDRF and mitigation funds are also being leveraged, not only for immediate relief but also for longer-term mitigation and resilience (e.g. funds for urban flood management, glacier lake outburst flood risk). [Business Standard+1](#)
- However, the allocation numbers fluctuate year to year depending on disaster events, political priorities, and available fiscal space.

Table 2: Displacement & Human Impact (2023)

Metric	Value
Internal displacements due to disasters in 2023	~ 500,000+ The Indian Express+1
Flood-related displacements in 2023	~ 352,000 (lowest since 2008) The Indian Express+2 Devdiscourse+2
Lives lost due to natural disasters FY 2024-25	3,080 (increase of ~18%) The Economic Times

Interpretation

- Even with improved warning systems or disaster mitigation, disasters continue to displace large numbers, demonstrating gaps in prevention, or else the intensity of disasters is rising.
- The reduction in displacements vs. 2022 seems promising, but the human cost remains high, and losses (both mortality and losses in property, livelihood) continue to occur.

Findings of Objective 2: To analyze how these relief and rehabilitation measures are experienced by different social groups (e.g., by region, class, caste, gender), assessing equity, access, and barriers

Disasters are not "equalizers"—instead, they often expose and intensify existing social inequalities. The **vulnerability paradigm** in disaster sociology (Wisner et al., 2004) emphasizes that the impact of disasters is socially constructed. Vulnerability is shaped by social location—class, caste, gender, age, disability, and access to land and resources—which determines the extent to which individuals and groups are exposed to harm, and how well they can recover. In India, marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and landless laborers tend to live in more hazard-prone areas and have limited access to institutional relief mechanisms (Kaushik et al., 2024).

Empirical literature and ethnographic studies demonstrate that state mechanisms of relief often operate through existing hierarchies. For example, female-headed households may be excluded due to lack of land titles; tribal communities may be ignored due to logistical challenges; and poor rural populations may lack access to bureaucratic systems needed to claim compensation (Joseph, 2021). Moreover, access to relief often depends on informal networks, connections with local power structures, and ability to navigate documentation requirements—factors that systematically disadvantage the socially excluded.

The concept of "**disaster justice**" has emerged in recent theoretical discourse, arguing for an equity-based lens in understanding both the distribution of disaster risk and the allocation of relief (Behera et al., 2023). This approach challenges the "one-size-fits-all" model of disaster response and advocates for targeted interventions that take into account social vulnerability. Theoretical findings under this objective affirm that while policies may appear universalistic, their implementation is profoundly shaped by social stratification, leading to unequal outcomes in disaster recovery.

Geographic Inequalities

- States in hill or remote areas (Himachal, Uttarakhand, North-East) often face more severe disaster risk (landslides, flash floods), but logistical challenges in relief delivery (road cuts, communication disruption).
- Coastal / low-lying states like Odisha, Andhra, West Bengal are prone to cyclones/flooding and require large scale rehabilitation; their state administrations have more experience, but still encounter problems in reaching remote hamlets.

Marginalized Communities

- Poorer households often lose more (livelihoods, housing) and have less capacity to recover. Often compensation or relief announcements are made, but actual benefit reaching them is delayed or reduced.
- Women, especially widows or female-headed households, often have less access to resources, may be excluded from compensation or rehousing due to lack of land titles or documentation.
- Caste dynamics: Scheduled Castes / Tribes in many states bear disproportionate brunt of vulnerability (because located in hazard-prone zones, less infrastructure), but evidence of targeted outreach or compensation is thin; often in media narratives, but robust data is rare.

Urban vs rural

- **Urban areas:** issues of urban flooding, drainage failures, overcrowding. The relief measures often do not adequately address urban poor or slum dwellers, whose housing is informal and less likely to receive formal compensation.
- **Rural areas:** more depending on agriculture; crop loss compensation often delayed or amounts contested; transport infrastructure damage more severe and harder to restore.

Barriers: administrative, informational, documentation, corruption

- Many reports note that beneficiaries complain of delays in disbursement, bureaucratic hurdles (paperwork, proofs of ownership), lack of awareness of schemes, or inability to access relief centers.
- Some criticised that announcements of relief are publicised prominently, but actual implementation lags behind; and sometimes political influence or partisan favoritism plays a role. For example – opposition leaders in some states have questioned whether the announced amounts have truly reached farmers or affected households. The Times of India

Trust and perception

- Where relief is prompt and visible, people tend to express greater trust in government. But where delays or failures are perceived, dissatisfaction increases, affecting legitimacy.
- The social narrative and media coverage strongly influence perception; people compare across states. For instance, when one state is seen to receive or implement relief better, people in other states demand similar or more.

Table 3: State-wise Relief & Critical Incidents

While data disaggregated by social group is limited, here is a table of some recent relief events and what is known about access / complaints.

State / Event	Allocated Relief / Compensation	Known Issues or Barriers Reported
Maharashtra (2025) unseasonal heavy rain damage to crops	₹2,215 crore relief sanctioned; ~14.3 million hectares farmland affected; ~3.1 million farmers to receive payments. The Times of India	Complaints of exclusions: "over 68 lakh farmers excluded due to flawed assessments." Delay in defining wet drought; calls for higher compensation. The Times of India
Punjab (2025 floods)	A massive flood affecting ~1,400 villages, >2.5 lakh acres flooded; government asked for ₹20,000 crore relief from Centre. The Times of India+1	Criticism that central relief is delayed or inadequate; that state assessments may underestimate extent; affected people concerned about slow rehabilitation.

Interpretation

- These examples show measurable social inequalities: large scale of impact does not always correspond to proportionate relief to all affected groups.
- Assessments (damage, loss) often contested, which affects inclusion/exclusion of beneficiaries.
- Administrative capacity, especially at district level, appears a key factor: where the state machinery is responsive, relief is faster. Where remote, or where governance is weak, issues multiply.

Findings of Objective 3: To identify gaps between policy/planning and implementation in relief & rehabilitation, and propose suggestions for improving effectiveness, responsiveness, and social justice

From a governance perspective, the "implementation gap" is a widely discussed theoretical construct that explains the divergence between policy intentions and ground realities. This is especially relevant in disaster management, where coordination across multiple levels—central, state, and local—is required. Theories of decentralized governance suggest that while disaster planning is often centralized, the actual implementation is highly localized, and success depends heavily on district administration capacity, training, and political alignment (Few, 2023; Sharma, 2021).

In the Indian context, several studies have highlighted that despite the availability of frameworks and fiscal resources, relief and rehabilitation efforts often suffer due to bureaucratic delays, fragmented authority, lack of accountability, and weak data systems (Hanspal, 2025). For instance, relief may be delayed due to complex approval mechanisms or misclassification of disaster severity. Moreover, absence of participatory mechanisms reduces community ownership and local adaptability. These findings align with the institutional void theory, where the absence of clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms leads to underperformance of even well-designed policies.

A sociological understanding of these gaps suggests that disaster policy is not only about logistics but also about power, trust, and social accountability. The failure to involve communities in decision-making processes—especially those most affected—undermines the legitimacy of state action and reduces the effectiveness of recovery efforts. Hence, theoretical findings stress the importance of building not only infrastructural but also institutional resilience that includes transparency, social audits, grievance redressal, and inclusion of marginalized voices in planning and response.

Findings on Gaps

- **Delay in disbursement vs announcement**
 - Many announcements are made soon after disaster events, but actual disbursal of funds / compensation takes time: weeks or months.
 - Some beneficiaries report that while funds are allocated, they are not accessible due to procedural delays.

- **Insufficient targeting / exclusion errors**
 - Some affected persons are excluded due to lack of documentation (e.g. land or property papers), or because damage assessments are not comprehensive.
 - Women, marginalized castes / tribes often suffer more exclusion.
- **Inadequate rehabilitation / long-term recovery**
 - Relief tends to focus on immediate needs: food, shelter, emergency repair. But longer term rehabilitation—rebuilding housing, restoring livelihoods, mental health, relocation from hazard zones—is less well-resourced or slow.
 - Mitigation measures are underfunded relative to relief (though funds are beginning to be earmarked).
- **Transparency, accountability, monitoring**
 - Public reporting of how much of allocated relief has actually been used / disbursed is inconsistent.
 - There is often no social audit or independent monitoring, making it hard to track gaps.
- **Unequal capacity across states**
 - Different states show different performance, often depending on their disaster management infrastructure, administrative readiness, local governance, technical / logistics capability.

The findings and policy recommendations emerging from the third objective—focused on identifying gaps between disaster policy planning and its on-ground implementation—are presented in a separate concluding section at the end of the paper. This section outlines actionable suggestions aimed at improving the effectiveness, responsiveness, and inclusivity of relief and rehabilitation measures, drawing from both theoretical insights and empirical patterns discussed throughout the study.

Research Conclusion

The present study has explored the intersection of disaster management policies and their sociological implications, focusing on how government relief and rehabilitation measures are formulated, implemented, and experienced across social strata in India. Natural disasters in the country are not merely environmental phenomena but social events that expose the structural vulnerabilities embedded in everyday life. The theoretical and empirical analysis highlights that while India's policy framework for disaster response has evolved over time, a significant gap remains between institutional intent and grassroots-level impact (Hanspal, 2025; Sharma, 2021).

The Indian state has built a relatively robust institutional framework for disaster relief and rehabilitation, anchored in the Disaster Management Act of 2005 and supported by fiscal instruments like the NDRF and SDRF. Over the years, allocation of funds has increased significantly, with recent years (2022–2025) witnessing large-scale disbursements for flood, cyclone, and landslide relief. However, the operationalization of these funds continues to be constrained by administrative delays, uneven governance capacity, and lack of coordination between central and state governments (Few, 2023). Despite growing fiscal investments, outcomes on the ground remain mixed.

One of the key conclusions from the study is that vulnerability is socially constructed. Disasters tend to disproportionately affect marginalized communities—such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and informal sector workers—who have less access to resources, institutional support, and recovery pathways (Kaushik et al., 2024). Relief mechanisms, although designed to be universal, often fail to account for these disparities. Bureaucratic procedures, lack of awareness, and political patronage limit the reach of formal support to those who need it the most (Joseph, 2021).

Furthermore, internal displacement caused by natural disasters—especially floods and cyclones—has emerged as a recurring challenge in India. As shown in secondary data, more than 500,000 people were displaced due to disasters in 2023 alone (IDMC, 2024). These displacements have far-reaching consequences beyond temporary shelter needs—they affect livelihoods, educational continuity, mental health, and social cohesion. Yet, there is an absence of comprehensive rehabilitation policies that consider long-term resettlement and integration of displaced populations.

The study also found that relief distribution and rehabilitation efforts lack inclusivity and responsiveness. While centralized frameworks like NDRF provide overarching financial mechanisms, the

absence of community participation, local customization, and social audit processes limits their effectiveness. This confirms theoretical insights from the literature, particularly the concepts of "implementation gap" and "institutional voids," which explain how policy failure often stems from unclear roles, weak accountability mechanisms, and fragmented authority at different administrative levels (Behera et al., 2023; Few, 2023).

A sociological lens also reveals that disaster response is not just about material aid, but about state–citizen relationships. How communities perceive the fairness, speed, and adequacy of relief significantly influences their trust in government institutions. Transparency in fund allocation, ease of access to compensation, and perceived justice in disbursement reinforce the legitimacy of the state, while inefficiencies and biases generate resentment and alienation (Sharma, 2021). Therefore, disaster governance should not only be efficient but also socially just.

Moreover, the regional disparities in disaster response are stark. States like Odisha and Tamil Nadu have made significant strides in cyclone preparedness and evacuation planning, while others struggle with reactive, ad hoc responses. These disparities are partly due to differences in state capacity, leadership, fiscal health, and disaster management infrastructure. As highlighted by Hanspal (2025), the fiscal federalism model in disaster funding needs reform to ensure more equitable and need-based resource distribution across states.

Another critical takeaway is that while relief is immediate, the scope and quality of rehabilitation and long-term mitigation are often inadequate. Investments in flood control infrastructure, early warning systems, and climate-resilient housing are sporadic and lack integration with broader development planning. The failure to institutionalize long-term rehabilitation as part of disaster management strategy perpetuates cycles of vulnerability, especially among those living in high-risk zones (Disaster Management in India, 2022).

In light of these findings, the study argues for a paradigm shift in disaster policy from a reactive relief-centric approach to a proactive, people-centric framework rooted in principles of equity, participation, and resilience. Disaster response must be decentralized, inclusive, and sensitive to social diversities. This includes strengthening panchayat-level disaster planning, building capacities of local functionaries, ensuring gender-sensitive relief protocols, and enabling marginalized voices in decision-making processes (Joseph, 2021; Kaushik et al., 2024).

In conclusion, disasters are not just natural events—they are deeply social processes. They expose fault lines in governance, resource distribution, and institutional responsiveness. Therefore, an effective disaster policy must not only aim at minimizing material losses but must also protect the dignity, rights, and aspirations of the people—especially the most vulnerable. Future policy reforms should be grounded in sociological insight, ensuring that disaster governance is not just about managing crises, but about rebuilding lives with justice and empathy.

Suggestions from the Study

- **Decentralize Disaster Planning and Implementation:** Relief and rehabilitation processes should be decentralized to empower district and block-level authorities. Local Disaster Management Authorities (LDMAs) should have more operational autonomy to design and implement region-specific interventions. This would enhance contextual relevance and ensure timely response, especially in geographically vulnerable areas.
- **Integrate Social Vulnerability Mapping in Planning:** Planning frameworks should incorporate detailed social vulnerability mapping that includes caste, class, gender, disability, and occupation. Such mapping would ensure that relief and rehabilitation programs address the specific needs of marginalized communities, who often remain invisible in disaster statistics and policies.
- **Establish Transparent and Participatory Monitoring Mechanisms:** A transparent monitoring and social audit system should be introduced at the panchayat and municipal levels to track fund utilization, relief distribution, and the delivery of rehabilitation benefits. Community participation in audits can ensure accountability and reduce corruption and elite capture.
- **Promote Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR):** Encouraging community-based approaches to disaster preparedness and mitigation is crucial. Civil society organizations and local leaders should be trained and involved in creating awareness, conducting mock drills, and preparing community emergency response plans to build long-term resilience.

- **Invest in Long-Term Rehabilitation Beyond Immediate Relief:** The government must shift from a relief-focused to a rehabilitation-focused strategy that includes livelihood restoration, psychosocial support, housing reconstruction, and education continuity. Special attention should be given to displaced populations to facilitate dignified resettlement.

Policy Recommendations

- **Institutionalize a National Framework for Equitable Relief Distribution:** Develop and implement a national guideline that mandates equity-sensitive relief distribution, ensuring all disaster response plans are reviewed through a social justice lens. This should include indicators for marginalized group inclusion and disaggregated data reporting.
- **Mandate Gender-Responsive Disaster Governance:** All disaster-related policies and implementation strategies should be made gender-responsive by ensuring representation of women in disaster management committees and ensuring relief materials meet the specific needs of women and children.
- **Reform Fiscal Allocation under SDRF/NDRF:** Revise the allocation mechanism of disaster funds to be need-based rather than only event-based. Include vulnerability indicators such as population density, poverty levels, and prior exposure to disasters in the funding criteria, thereby ensuring equitable distribution of central assistance.
- **Introduce a National Database for Displacement and Rehabilitation:** A centralized, real-time database on disaster-induced displacement, relief received, and rehabilitation status should be created and updated regularly. This will improve coordination, track gaps, and assist in evidence-based policymaking.
- **Embed Disaster Preparedness in Development Policies:** Integrate disaster risk reduction into all major development programs such as housing, agriculture, health, and education. Infrastructure in high-risk zones must be built to disaster-resilient standards, and schools and hospitals must be equipped as relief shelters during emergencies.

As the findings of this study suggest, effective disaster governance cannot be built on reactive measures alone—it requires inclusive, participatory, and equity-driven policy frameworks. Relief and rehabilitation are not just technical interventions but acts of restoring human dignity and social justice.

“Disasters do not discriminate, but response systems often do. The measure of a just society lies in how it protects its most vulnerable in times of crisis.” — Adapted from Amartya Sen

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