

WHERE RIGHTS RUN DRY

A report on human rights camps in Tharparkar



Introduction

Tharparkar in Sindh remains one of Pakistan's most underserved districts, where chronic water scarcity, land dispossession, displacement, inadequate access to healthcare and education, labour exploitation, discrimination against religious minorities and transgender persons, and the rising incidence of suicides have created a persistent human rights crisis. Despite the severity of these challenges, the voices of affected communities are seldom reflected in policy discussions or development planning. Recognising the need to document these concerns firsthand and amplify local perspectives, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) organised a series of human rights camps in Tharparkar.

On 14 April 2025, HRCP held three human rights camps in Chachro, Islamkot and Nagarparkar (Tharparkar district), providing residents with an opportunity to share their experiences and raise concerns directly with the Commission. The following day, HRCP convened a multi-stakeholder consultation in Mithi to discuss the findings emerging from the camps and explore policy and institutional responses to the district's longstanding human rights challenges. Some 200 people attended the camps and consultation. HRCP Council members Asad Iqbal Butt (chairperson), Qazi Khizer Habib (vice-chair, HRCP Sindh), Sohail Sangi, Pushpa Kumari, Saleem Jarwar, Imdadullah Khoso, Khushaldas Kalani and Sadia Baloch led the discussions and consultation.

The issues raised in these gatherings directly correlate with provisions of the Constitution of Pakistan, such as the right to life (Article 9), equality before the law (Article 25), freedom of religion or belief (Article 20), the right to education (Article 25-A), and the state's obligation to ensure citizens' social and economic wellbeing, including the provision of clean water under Articles 9A and 38. Furthermore, these issues highlight Pakistan's international human rights obligations, including those under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (covering the rights to health, education, and an adequate standard of living, including water); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (covering the rights to life and non-discrimination); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (regarding child marriage); the

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (addressing caste discrimination faced by lower-caste Hindus). The active coal and mining industry in the area also necessitates attention to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Key findings

The Islamkot camp, organised at the local press club, drew over 50 participants from distant villages and surrounding areas. Attendees included farmers, dumper drivers, teachers, doctors, journalists, lawyers, students, women, and transgender individuals. Two similar camps were held concurrently in Chachro and Nagarparkar, where elders, women artisans, religious minorities, and communities affected by Rangers' presence in border areas participated. Most participants submitted written complaints, resulting in over 50 registered complaints at the Islamkot camp alone. In total, HRCP recorded over 51 named participants, though only four were women, indicating a significant gender disparity in the public consultation process.

Several specific patterns emerged from the discussions. A prominent issue was water insecurity, repeatedly highlighted through people's complete reliance on rainwater across Tharparkar, the malfunction of reverse osmosis plants, and the presence of a 'tanker mafia' in towns such as Mithi that capitalise on water scarcity.

The second evident issue concerned land: corporate land grabbing due to the Thar Coal Project and Gorano Dam,¹ allegedly fraudulent

¹ The Thar Coal Project was launched in 2019 with the objective of producing cheaper electricity and serving the public interest. However, local communities argue that the project has led to the acquisition of their agricultural land and common grazing land. Large-scale infrastructure, including railway lines, roads, and water-pumping stations, have been constructed on such land while local communities continue to face challenges related to water, livelihoods, and the provision of basic services. As a result, many residents feel that they have borne the cost of development without receiving a proportionate share of its benefits. The Gorano Dam is a 1,500-acre reservoir situated approximately 30 km from Islamkot. It was designed to store the saline groundwater extracted from the Thar coalfields during open-pit mining operations. However, the dam has been the focus of

record-keeping by the revenue department and *patwaris*, and the forced displacement of Scheduled Caste individuals from their ancestral lands.

Participants also identified psychological distress and suicides in Thar as a serious but underreported problem. One senior police officer informed HRCP that a contributing factor was the Hindu philosophy of *aawagoon* (reincarnation), which some community members used to rationalise the need to escape intolerable situations, often linked to the poverty and discrimination faced by Scheduled Castes. A second factor mentioned by participants was the debt trap: informal lenders provide loans based on land documents for necessities such as motorcycles or marriages. When borrowers cannot repay these high-interest loans, their lands are seized, sometimes triggering suicide.

Further testimonies revealed discriminatory practices based on religion, such as denial of school entry, teachers losing jobs in private organisations, and refusal to issue national identity cards. One incident recounted was the alleged murder of two Hindu brothers in Mithi in 2019, following which suspicion fell on the Ahmadi community, leading to the arrest and torture of at least 12 Ahmadi individuals. Transgender individuals reported not being issued identity cards, facing ridicule, and lacking institutional protection.

Laborers' testimonies were equally stark: women who had trained as dumper drivers and RO-plant operators in the Thar coal mines alleged that they had lost their jobs for raising concerns about working conditions and had received no experience certificates or benefits. Laborers in China clay factories in Nagarparkar reported wages as low as Rs 500 per day.

Additionally, issues related to underage marriages, with girls reportedly marrying as young as nine, and school closures due to absent appointed teachers, were frequently highlighted.

In Nagarparkar village, community members and a local historian recounted the plight of the Karoonjhar Hills. This range, housing over 600 Indus Valley Civilisation sites in a narrow border belt, faces

sustained opposition from residents of nearby villages. Local communities contend that the project has encroached on privately owned farmland, communal grazing areas and ancestral lands, undermining traditional livelihoods, forcing displacement, and jeopardising livestock on which many families depend.

increasing threats from granite mining using dynamite. Residents of Chachro village narrated their community's history as a 'sensitive' border area post-1971, observing that owing to its proximity to the Indian border, the area has long held strategic importance. They pointed out that the state has tended to discourage local NGOs from working for the socioeconomic uplift of the area.

Box: 'A graveyard of projects'...

Behind the statistics and policy debates emerged the voices of people whose lives have been shaped by neglect, discrimination and dispossession. The following testimonies were recorded from the human rights camps and consultation held in Tharparkar:

Krishan Sharma, a well-known local activist, described Tharparkar as a 'dumping ground for all resources, a graveyard of projects.' He noted that funds arrived after every National Finance Commission award, but projects would last only a few years. A Thar farmer, commenting on the government's lack of interest in drip irrigation—a method proven effective in the nearby Kunri area—considers it an irony.

Ali Shah Faqir, a member of the trans community, recounted his long struggle to obtain a computerised national identity card, without which he was unable to exercise any other rights.

Mohni and Rasheeda, women working as dumper drivers, said they received two years of training at a coal company but were later fired without receiving certificates after voicing complaints about workplace conditions.

Molana Chanesor Somroo, a seminary teacher, described how the village of Wibhiar Sobra disappeared due to the construction of a dam. He pointed out that the villagers had not asked for the dam to be demolished but instead for the schools and hospitals promised by the government to be built.

The camps generated a valuable body of documentary evidence on previously underexposed abuses, alongside multiple testimonies that HRCP intends to use to support future advocacy and referral efforts.

The consultation in Mithi provided a rare opportunity for civil society, journalists, and activists to converge, compare experiences from the three camps, agree on future steps, and plan direct engagement with Karachi and Hyderabad-based journalists to raise awareness about the situation in Thar.

Recommendations

The Government of Sindh and federal institutions should:

- Pass the pending Thar Development Authority bill and create a water board to provide services to approximately 2,400 villages.
- Make the Labour Department functional in Tharparkar to address violations against brick kiln workers, salt mine workers, and coal sector workers.
- Create a policy for land allocation to landless peasants and women.
- Establish a research institute for drought-resistant crops like jowar and guar.
- Ensure electricity relief for low-income households.
- Regulate environmental and safety standards for coal mining, granite mining, and China clay mining, including in the Karoonjhar Hills heritage site.

The judiciary and police should:

- Ensure the investigation of suspected suicides through post-mortem examinations.
- Register FIRs irrespective of the accused, including revenue department officials or private sector companies.
- Independently investigate allegations of land grabbing by *patwaris* and the involvement of police, the revenue department, and coal mining companies.

Civil society and human rights organisations should:

- Sustain the camp model with regular outreach and grassroots village-level committees focused on labour, women's safety, religious tolerance, and heritage protection.
- Commission a dedicated, evidence-based study into the causes of suicide in Thar.
- Support transgender community members in securing identity documentation.

The media should:

- Increase coverage of Tharparkar beyond just breaking stories, particularly by involving media from Karachi and Hyderabad.

- Cover suicide cases through investigations rather than accepting official statistics as fact.
- Maintain a constant watch on the operations of companies in the coal, granite, and China clay industries.