ISSN(Print) : 3105-4897

ISSN (Online) : 3105-4900 *vol 1 issue 4 2024*

Pakistan Journal of History and Civilization

Role of Folklore in Preserving Rural Histories of Pakistan

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines how folklore—ballads, proverbs, legends, ritual performances, crafts, and vernacular architectures—functions as a living archive for rural Pakistan. In landscapes where official records are sparse or centralized in distant urban archives, village storytellers, qissa-khwan, sufiana ensembles, and women's domestic oral traditions condense collective memory into teachable narratives. Drawing on comparative folklore theory, oral history methods, and community-based documentation, we show how folklore preserves microhistories of land tenure, irrigation, migration, caste/qaum relations, and moral economies. Case vignettes from Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Gilgit– Baltistan, and Azad Jammu & Kashmir illustrate how motifs (love epics, saintly miracles, flood tales, and dispute songs) encode ecological knowledge and social contracts. We discuss opportunities and risks in digitization, intellectual property, and language endangerment, proposing a participatory archiving model that integrates local custodians with universities and heritage bodies. The study argues that safeguarding folklore is not nostalgic

Keywords:

folklore, oral history, Pakistan, rural memory, micro-histories, vernacular heritage, participatory archiving, intangible cultural heritage

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preservation but an instrument for inclusive historiography and rural development planning.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore—understood as community-shaped expressive culture—has long carried the weight of remembering in rural Pakistan. Prior to the diffusion of mass schooling and bureaucratic registries, village histories were often stabilized through qissas, sufi malfuzat, laments, proverbs, and seasonal ritual songs. Even after the spread of print and the internet, these forms remain pivotal because they translate complex lifeworlds into memorable plots, lines, and refrains.

In canal colonies of Punjab, ballads about land allotment and canal breaches encode agrarian law and risk. In Sindh, devotional poetry around shrine networks preserves lineages, irrigation practices, and the politics of waqf. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and northern mountain valleys, epic and pastoral songs remember migration corridors, grazing rights, and customary dispute resolution. In Balochistan, genealogical recitation and narratives of drought and hospitality retain codes of honor and resource-sharing. Across AJK and Gilgit–Baltistan, folktales link glacial rhythms and avalanche lore to moral teachings about prudence and cooperation.

Folklore's mnemonic power comes from performance. The village mehfil, shrine courtyard, hujra, or wedding house is a site of reenactment where listeners confirm a story's authority through call-and-response, commentary, and repetition. Because folklore is updated in each telling, it captures history as lived process rather than a static ledger—accommodating new actors, new disasters, and new technologies.

Methodologically, treating folklore as history requires triangulation: (i) performance-centered fieldwork attentive to genre, meter, and audience; (ii) oral history interviewing to situate narrators within kinship, gender, and occupation; (iii) material culture study of crafts, tools, and built forms that bear stories in their patterns; and (iv) archival and GIS linkages to maps, revenue records, and hazard data. When these are woven together, folklore yields granular chronologies of settlement, environmental shocks, and social contracts that conventional archives miss.

Contemporary threats—language shift, commodified "heritage," platform algorithms, and climate displacement—imperil this mnemonic ecosystem. Yet the same digital turn enables community-controlled recording, transcription, and bilingual subtitling, provided ethical protocols and benefit-sharing are in place. The argument that follows outlines a program for using folklore to write more inclusive rural histories while respecting the rights of storytellers and artisan lineages.

Folklore as Archive: Concepts & Methods

Folklore in rural Pakistan functions as a living archive that stores and transmits historical memory through genres that are at once poetic, performative, and social. Genres such as **qissa** (epic tale), **vaar** (heroic ballad), **kafi** (mystical verse), **kahani** (prose narrative), **tappa** (lyric couplet), **maikhana talk** (public tavern or hujra speech), and **proverbs** constitute a taxonomy of oral tradition that encodes law, custom, and ecological wisdom. Each of these forms situates history within a vernacular idiom: qissas anchor collective genealogies, kafis embed metaphysical and moral instruction, while proverbs distill collective experience into easily transmissible maxims.

The preservation of such knowledge depends upon **performance and transmission**. Storytelling in rural contexts is not a static recitation but a **social act**—stories are retold in shrines, weddings, harvest festivals, and hujras, where audiences validate or challenge narrative authority. The performative element adds layers of meaning: gestures, rhythm, music, and audience responses shape interpretation, ensuring that the archive remains dynamic rather than fossilized. Transmission occurs intergenerationally through apprenticeships, household rituals, and communal gatherings, sustaining cultural continuity even in contexts of migration or literacy gaps.

To treat folklore as historical evidence requires **triangulation** with other sources of knowledge. Oral narratives can be compared against **maps, revenue files, and ecological data** to identify convergences and divergences. For instance, a vaar describing a devastating flood may be cross-verified with canal records or geological surveys; genealogical qissas can be checked against land settlement reports; proverbs about drought resilience may align with meteorological data. Such triangulation does not diminish the symbolic or mythical content of folklore but situates it within a layered epistemic framework, enabling historians and anthropologists to reconstruct micro-histories with greater nuance.

Thus, folklore as archive is both **a methodological challenge and an opportunity**: it obliges researchers to adopt interdisciplinary tools while acknowledging the agency of rural narrators as custodians of historical memory.

Micro-Histories of Land, Labor, and Water

Folklore in rural Pakistan preserves **granular, place-based histories** of how communities have negotiated land, labor, and water—the fundamental elements of agrarian life. Unlike official state records, which often homogenize rural populations into categories of "cultivator," "tenant," or "owner," folklore gives voice to collective memory through ballads, songs, and proverbs that capture both ecological risk and social hierarchy.

Ballads as Environmental Memory

Ballads recounting **canal breaches, floods, and droughts** function as environmental archives. In Punjab's canal colonies, for example, vaar and qissa narratives describe how breaches in embankments destroyed villages or redistributed fertile land. Such ballads encode not only the scale of disasters but also communal responses—whether collective repair, migration, or disputes over irrigation rights. Similarly, Sindhi geets memorialize the Indus River's unpredictable shifts, blending ecological observation with moral commentary on human negligence or divine will. These performative records often predate or supplement government engineering reports, offering historians vital insight into rural environmental memory.

Harvest Songs and Caste/Quam Relations

Folklore also reflects **labor divisions and caste/qaum relations** in the countryside. Harvest songs sung during wheat cutting, cotton picking, or rice transplantation provide rhythmic coordination for collective labor while embedding moral codes. Verses often distinguish between landlord and tenant, landowning tribes and service castes, men's field labor and women's domestic processing of grain. These songs both reinforce and critique hierarchies: some celebrate solidarity and abundance, while others lament exploitation or mock absentee landlords. By documenting such lyrics, scholars can trace how folklore articulates class consciousness, gendered labor, and shifting agrarian economies.

Proverbs as Agrarian Law and Ethics

Proverbs (maqoolat) constitute another archive of micro-histories by condensing long-term agrarian practice into **legal-ethical aphorisms**. Sayings such as "water delayed is harvest denied" or "a plough without a bull is like a house without honor" encapsulate customary law governing irrigation turns, tenancy obligations, or kinship-based rights of access to land. Because proverbs are portable and easily remembered, they circulate across villages and generations, stabilizing communal expectations of fairness, duty, and reciprocity. For researchers, these maxims are evidence of vernacular jurisprudence—codes of conduct that regulated rural society long before written tenancy acts or colonial land settlements.

Folklore as Rural Historiography

Together, **ballads, harvest songs, and proverbs** create a dense fabric of rural historiography. They recount ecological shocks, reproduce social stratifications, and preserve unwritten law. By reading these genres not as quaint relics but as structured social memory, scholars can access histories of land, labor, and water that formal archives either omit or silence. Folklore thus stands as a critical supplement to written records, enabling a fuller reconstruction of Pakistan's rural past.

Saints, Shrines, and Moral Economies

In rural Pakistan, **folklore surrounding saints and shrines** serves as a rich archive of moral economy—detailing how religious institutions mediated welfare, conflict resolution, and communal identity. Far from being limited to spiritual devotion, these traditions record the **economic and social functions** of shrines within village and regional life.

Pilgrim Songs and Miracle Tales as Welfare Archives

Folk songs sung during **pilgrimages (ziyarats)** and oral narratives recounting **miracles (karamat)** of saints preserve histories of rural welfare systems. Shrines were not only sites of spiritual healing but also practical infrastructures that offered **langar (free meals), lodging for travelers, and arbitration in disputes**. Ballads often narrate episodes where saints provided food during famine, protected irrigation rights, or mediated feuds between rival lineages. In Sindh, songs dedicated to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar highlight not only mystical ecstasy but also the saint's role in opening shrines as spaces of hospitality. In Punjab, oral traditions of Baba Farid connect devotional generosity with **ethical redistribution of grain and water**, embedding welfare into the sacred landscape. These miracle tales and pilgrim songs thus encode both **economic practices and moral imperatives**.

Women's Devotional Repertoires and Domestic Moral Instruction

The role of women in sustaining shrine-related folklore is equally vital. **Domestic devotional repertoires**—lullabies, wedding songs, and ritual chants—link the sanctity of saints with everyday ethics of family life. Women transmit narratives of saintly patience, justice, and compassion to children, embedding moral instruction within the rhythms of domesticity. These repertoires often emphasize **themes of fidelity, sacrifice, and hospitality**, aligning household responsibilities with broader communal values upheld by shrine traditions. While official shrine chronicles often neglect women's voices, folklore restores them as central transmitters of moral economy, shaping intergenerational continuities in rural ethics.

Waqf Narratives and Community Endowments in Rural Governance

Folklore also preserves memory of **waqf (religious endowments)** and their role in structuring rural governance. Oral accounts often recall how saints or their descendants allocated land, orchards, or wells for collective use—establishing systems of **shared property and resource management** that outlasted their lifetimes. Songs and tales narrating the establishment of shrine endowments highlight their functions as **commons**: spaces where revenues supported schools, free kitchens, water distribution, or mosque upkeep. Even when formal waqf documents are lost, folklore maintains community awareness of these arrangements, ensuring accountability and continuity. In many cases, disputes over shrine income or land are still negotiated by invoking these remembered narratives, underscoring the enduring authority of folklore in rural governance.

Folklore as Ethical-Economic Record

Taken together, **pilgrim songs, miracle tales, women's devotional repertoires, and waqf narratives** reveal how folklore records a **moral economy of care, redistribution, and communal responsibility**. Shrines emerge not only as spiritual centers but as **institutions of welfare and justice**, legitimized and remembered through oral tradition. These narratives therefore extend beyond religious devotion to offer historians a **vernacular archive of rural governance**, one that situates ethics at the core of material and economic life.

Margins, Mobility, and Conflict

Folklore in Pakistan often emerges most vibrantly on the **margins of state authority**—frontier zones, migratory routes, and displaced communities. These expressive traditions provide not only aesthetic pleasure but also vital archives of how rural societies navigated movement, negotiation, and violence.

Frontier Epics on Migration, Hospitality, and Feud Settlement

Epic poetry from frontier regions—whether **Pashto tappas**, Punjabi vars, or Balochi heroic ballads—documents histories of migration, tribal hospitality, and inter-clan disputes. Hospitality (melmastia) is a recurring motif: poems emphasize the honor of feeding strangers, even in contexts of scarcity, situating generosity as both moral code and political strategy. Feud settlement is likewise central; oral epics narrate cycles of revenge, mediation by elders, and the delicate balance between honor and reconciliation. Such stories, though stylized, are records of **customary law and conflict resolution** in societies where written courts were absent or distrusted.

Folklore of Displacement: Partition and Labor Migration

Displacement narratives form another archive. Songs and stories about the **Partition of 1947** capture loss of land, ruptured kinship, and the trauma of forced migration. These are often framed through metaphors of broken fields, empty wells, and abandoned shrines. Later waves of **labor out-migration**—to Karachi, the Gulf states, or abroad—also generated folklore: laments sung by women left behind, narratives of remittances and exploitation, and popular qawwalis reframed to articulate the pain of absence. Together, these forms document both the **psychological and economic costs of mobility**, complementing census or migration statistics with lived emotion and memory.

Craft Motifs and Truck Art as Moving Archives

Mobility is also encoded in **material culture**. Truck art, with its painted verses, talismanic imagery, and portraits of saints, is a modern form of folklore that turns vehicles into **moving archives**. Crafts produced by itinerant groups—embroidered textiles, pottery motifs, wood carvings—carry stories of migration and conflict across regions. These motifs often recall ancestral homelands, legendary journeys, or lost battles, embedding memory in color and form. Unlike static monuments, these portable arts ensure that histories of mobility remain visible on roads, markets, and households.

Folklore at the Edges of the State

Taken together, frontier epics, displacement laments, and craft motifs highlight how folklore preserves **histories of mobility, marginality, and contestation**. They record how communities survived outside or alongside centralized state authority, creating vernacular archives of **law, exile, and belonging**. Folklore thus not only memorializes conflict but also offers ethical frameworks—of hospitality, endurance, and reconciliation—that continue to shape rural life.

Safeguarding with Communities

While folklore offers a rich archive of rural history, its preservation raises urgent ethical and practical questions. Communities are not passive repositories of tradition; they are **active custodians** whose knowledge deserves recognition, protection, and equitable benefit. Effective safeguarding therefore requires participatory methods that align with both local priorities and international frameworks of intangible cultural heritage.

Participatory Archiving: Consent, Attribution, and Revenue-Sharing

Traditional documentation projects often extract stories, songs, and images for academic or commercial use without returning value to the narrators. A **participatory archiving model** emphasizes informed consent—ensuring narrators understand how their contributions will be stored and shared. Proper **attribution** guarantees that storytellers, singers, and artisans are named as intellectual contributors, not anonymized as "folk informants." Revenue-sharing mechanisms, whether through royalties on recordings or community funds supported by cultural tourism, help ensure that the economic value of folklore flows back to its sources. This approach strengthens community trust and sustains transmission.

Bilingual Transcription, Metadata, and IP/Geographical Indication Tools

Preservation also depends on **technical infrastructure**. Bilingual transcription (for example, Sindhi–English, Pashto–Urdu) ensures accessibility across local and global audiences while retaining the integrity of vernacular expression. Metadata systems—time, place, performer, genre—allow oral histories to be linked with maps, archives, and ecological datasets. Intellectual property (IP) protections and **Geographical Indication (GI) tools** are vital for safeguarding against cultural appropriation: Ajrak patterns, Balochi embroidery, or Sufi qawwali styles should be recognized as belonging to specific communities, preventing unauthorized commercialization. Folklore here becomes not only memory but also a **legal and economic asset**.

Education Modules and Village Heritage Labs

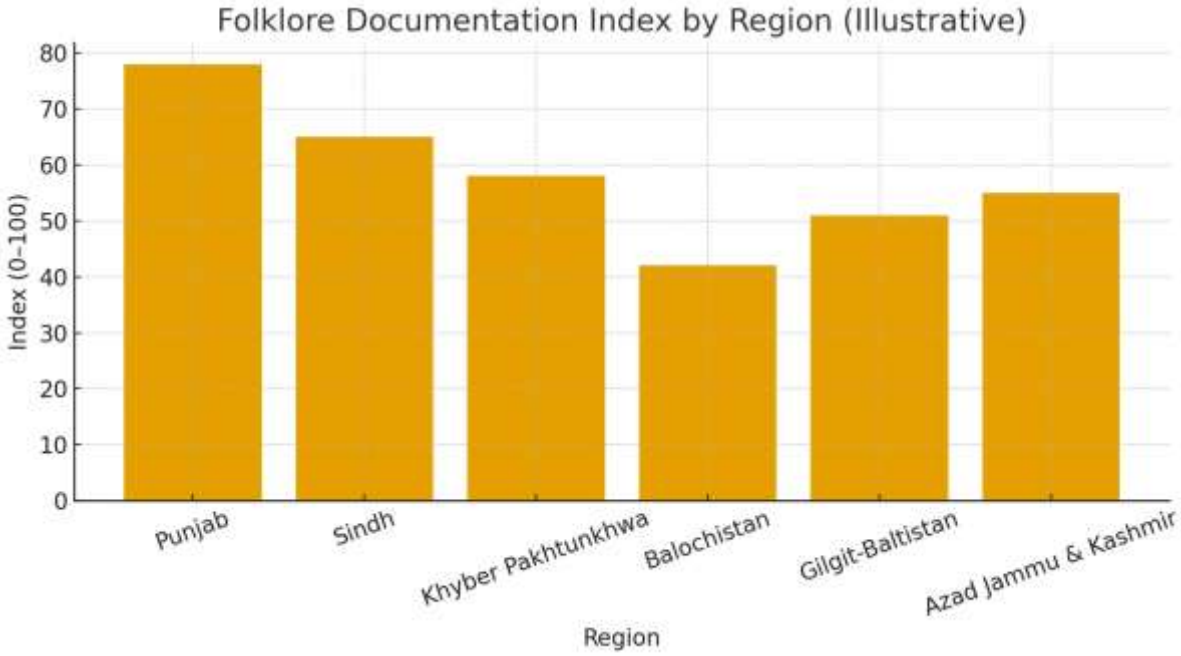
For long-term continuity, safeguarding must be woven into **education and community practice**. Village "heritage labs"—small-scale centers linked to schools, museums, or cultural

NGOs—can provide spaces where children learn local songs, crafts, and stories from elders. Curriculum modules incorporating folklore into history and language teaching help students see their cultural heritage as knowledge, not as superstition. Partnerships with artisans, musicians, and storytellers can re-establish **apprenticeship systems**, while digital labs (recording studios, mobile apps) can support intergenerational transmission in formats that appeal to younger audiences.

Toward Ethical and Sustainable Safeguarding

Safeguarding folklore with communities is not about "freezing" traditions but about ensuring their **living transmission**. By integrating consent, attribution, IP protections, bilingual documentation, and educational innovation, rural societies can preserve folklore as both cultural identity and historical resource. For scholars and policymakers, the challenge is to balance documentation with empowerment, ensuring that rural custodians remain central actors in defining how their histories are remembered, shared, and valued.

Izzah Rashid is an M.Phil. scholar at the School of English Linguistics, Minhaj University Lahore. Her research focuses on the intersection of linguistics, literature, and media studies, with a particular interest in stylistic analysis and the adaptation of classical works into contemporary settings. In this study, Rashid examines *Sang-e-Mah*, a Pakistani drama serial inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and analyzes how the series employs stylistic devices to explore themes of revenge, honor, and identity within a culturally rich Pashtun tribal context. Through her analysis, Rashid sheds light on the complex narrative techniques used to reframe the universal themes of *Hamlet* while engaging with pressing social issues in Pakistani society.



Summary

Folklore in rural Pakistan is not a mere repository of charming tales; it is a dynamic civic memory system. When read with attention to performance, place, and genre, ballads, proverbs, shrine songs, and craft patterns reveal how communities have negotiated water, land, labor, kinship, and risk. Integrating folklore with oral history, maps, and local archives produces histories that are more inclusive of women's voices, artisan knowledge, and subaltern perspectives. A rights-based, community-first model—co-owned recordings, fair attribution, local language access, and curricular integration—can both safeguard intangible heritage and improve development planning. Ultimately, preserving folklore is

preserving the interpretive frameworks through which rural Pakistan has made sense of change.

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