



Pakistan Journal of History and Civilization

Cultural Heritage Preservation in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's cultural heritage spans deep-time archaeological landscapes, Mughal urban ensembles, vernacular architectures, and vibrant intangible practices. Preserving this heritage faces cross-cutting pressures: climate and hydrological extremes, rapid urbanization, encroachment, resource constraints, illicit trafficking, and uneven regulatory enforcement. This paper synthesizes the legal-institutional framework and risk landscape, highlights lessons from recent flood impacts and conservation programs, and outlines practical opportunities in community-based stewardship, risk-informed planning, digital documentation, and blended finance. We argue that scalable preservation in Pakistan requires (i) stronger provincial-federal coordination after devolution, (ii) climate-smart conservation tied to disaster risk management, and (iii) inclusive models that treat communities as co-managers of both tangible and intangible heritage.

Keywords:

Pakistan heritage, conservation policy, climate risk, urban encroachment, community stewardship, intangible heritage, digital documentation, cultural economics

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan contains six UNESCO World Heritage Sites—ranging from the Bronze Age urban complex at Mohenjo-daro to Mughal masterpieces in Lahore and Rohtas—alongside a large tentative list and dense landscapes of protected monuments under provincial registers. These assets are not only carriers of identity but also drivers of education, tourism, and creative economies. Yet, the stewardship environment is complex. The Antiquities Act (1975) set national protections, but constitutional devolution has shifted significant conservation responsibilities to provinces, creating coordination challenges as well as opportunities for locally responsive policy. Meanwhile, the 2022 super-floods underscored climate exposure of earthen and masonry heritage, with emergency stabilization needed at several sites. Intangible heritage—from Kalasha calendrical knowledge (Suri Jagek) to crafts and ritual performance—requires urgent safeguarding and livelihoods integration to remain viable in rapidly changing socio-ecologies. A forward path blends better laws and enforcement with people-centered conservation, climate adaptation, and digital tools.

Legal–Institutional Landscape and Governance

Context. The **Antiquities Act of 1975** established a national framework for protecting Pakistan’s cultural heritage, covering movable and immovable antiquities, monuments, and sites. However, after the **18th Constitutional Amendment (2010)**, most operational responsibilities shifted to the provincial level. Each province now maintains its own legislation—such as the **Sindh Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (1994)**—to regulate conservation, inventory, and management of heritage resources.

Gaps. Despite this legal scaffolding, multiple weaknesses persist: overlapping mandates between federal and provincial bodies, uneven institutional capacity, limited financial resources, and inconsistent penalties for violations. Monitoring remains sporadic, leaving many heritage assets vulnerable to illicit construction, encroachment, or unauthorized alterations.

Actions. Strengthening the governance environment requires:

Harmonizing definitions and penalties across federal and provincial statutes.

Establishing a **shared national inventory** with open access for provincial departments, researchers, and stakeholders.

Creating **inter-provincial data exchange mechanisms** to align policy and practice.

Introducing **specialized heritage prosecutors** and judicial training to ensure effective enforcement.

Mainstreaming heritage protection into broader urban planning and land-use policies.

Risk and Resilience: Climate, Disasters, and Urban Pressure

Findings. The vulnerability of Pakistan’s heritage assets to environmental and urban stressors has been dramatically highlighted by the **2022 super-floods**, which inflicted severe damage on the protective coverings and earthen structures at **Mohenjo-daro**, one of the country’s most iconic UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Beyond catastrophic events, chronic threats such as **drainage failures, capillary water rise, and salt efflorescence** continuously erode the structural integrity of masonry and mud-brick monuments. Furthermore, the rapid pace of

metropolitan growth and urban encroachment has intensified land-use pressures around heritage zones, often resulting in the loss of protective buffers and illegal construction activities that compromise archaeological landscapes and historic city cores.

Actions. Addressing these risks requires a multi-scalar resilience framework that integrates climate adaptation with urban governance. Key measures include:

Establishing **site-level risk registers** that document vulnerabilities and inform prioritized interventions.

Implementing **hydrology-first maintenance strategies**, including functional drainage networks, berms, and sacrificial protective layers to reduce water infiltration.

Developing **early-warning tie-ins** with disaster management authorities to enable rapid stabilization during extreme events.

Integrating **encroachment buffers** into city master plans, ensuring that zoning policies safeguard the immediate surroundings of heritage sites.

Promoting **green infrastructure solutions**—such as vegetative barriers and climate-sensitive landscaping—that can mitigate flood risks while enhancing the cultural landscape.

Programs and Good Practices

Example. The **Walled City of Lahore Authority (WCLA)** provides a compelling case of integrated urban–heritage management in Pakistan. Established in 2012, the Authority has overseen the conservation of iconic sites such as the **Lahore Fort** and **Shalimar Gardens**—both UNESCO World Heritage properties—while simultaneously revitalizing historic neighborhoods. Its approach blends technical conservation with **visitor services, cultural programming, and community engagement**, creating a sustainable model where heritage functions as both a cultural and economic resource. Initiatives such as improved urban infrastructure, pedestrianization, and craft promotion have demonstrated the value of linking conservation to urban regeneration and local livelihoods.

Actions. The WCLA model illustrates the potential of **special purpose vehicles (SPVs)** dedicated to heritage precincts. Replicating such bodies in other historic centers—such as **Thatta, Taxila, or Multan**—could address gaps in management and coordination. Practical steps include:

Designing **performance-linked grants** that incentivize timely and quality maintenance of heritage assets.

Establishing **transparent visitation data dashboards**, enabling monitoring of tourism flows and ensuring revenues are reinvested in site upkeep.

Encouraging **public–private partnerships (PPPs)** and community-based initiatives that tie conservation to employment, crafts, and small-scale enterprise development.

Embedding **cultural programming**—festivals, guided tours, educational workshops—into conservation projects to enhance public ownership and awareness.

Community-Based Stewardship and Intangible Heritage

Context. The safeguarding of **intangible heritage** is as critical as the conservation of monumental sites. Pakistan's diverse cultural landscape encompasses oral traditions, crafts, music, rituals, and indigenous knowledge systems that sustain community identity. UNESCO's inclusion of **Suri Jagek**, the Kalasha people's traditional meteorological and astronomical practice, on the **Urgent Safeguarding List** underscores the global recognition of such knowledge as **living heritage**. These traditions are not static; they evolve through social practice and intergenerational transmission. However, without adequate support, many risk decline under pressures of modernization, migration, and socio-economic change.

Actions. Strengthening intangible heritage requires models of **community-based stewardship**, where local custodians are empowered as active co-managers. Key strategies include:

Formalizing **co-management Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)** between heritage authorities and local councils to institutionalize community roles.

Providing **micro-grants for crafts, rituals, and performance traditions**, supporting continuity and innovation.

Establishing **licensing systems for community guides**, ensuring both quality interpretation and livelihood opportunities.

Incorporating **local heritage into school curricula**, thereby embedding cultural knowledge into formal education.

Respecting **protocols for sacred and restricted knowledge**, ensuring ethical documentation and transmission.

Promoting **ethical tourism standards** that protect community dignity, prevent exploitation, and ensure revenue-sharing with local custodians.

By foregrounding community participation, Pakistan can build a heritage framework that not only preserves artifacts and practices but also **strengthens cultural resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable livelihoods**.

Digital Documentation and Financing

Digital. The increasing fragility of Pakistan's tangible heritage necessitates systematic **digital documentation** as a safeguard against loss and as a tool for conservation planning. Emerging technologies—such as **unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), photogrammetry, and 3D laser scanning**—enable high-resolution baselines for monitoring structural change over time. The adoption of **Heritage Building Information Modeling (HBIM)** platforms for major sites such as Mohenjo-daro or Lahore Fort could provide dynamic, open-access repositories that integrate architectural, environmental, and historical data. Furthermore, **crowd-sourced inventories**, validated by experts, can expand coverage to vernacular and lesser-known heritage assets, creating a participatory and inclusive heritage map.

Finance. Sustainable heritage preservation also requires diversified and resilient financing mechanisms. Overreliance on limited government allocations constrains conservation programs. Instead, a **blended financing model** can draw on:

Public funds earmarked for cultural heritage and tourism.

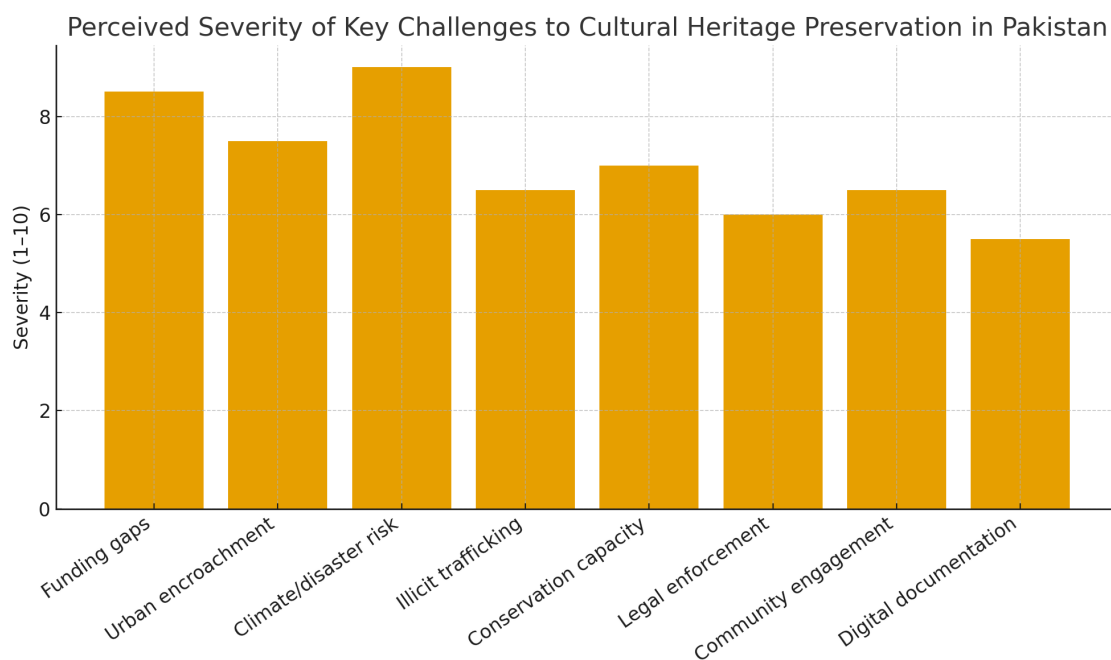
Endowments and trust funds dedicated to long-term site maintenance.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives targeting cultural sustainability.

Diaspora bonds that channel expatriate engagement into heritage preservation.

Impact tourism fees, ring-fenced to directly support preventive maintenance and **risk reduction measures**.

By combining **digital innovation** with **sustainable financing**, Pakistan can build a future-proof system of heritage management—one that both secures material culture against risks and mobilizes heritage as a driver of education, community pride, and economic growth.



Summary

Pakistan’s heritage future hinges on aligning laws and institutions with climate-resilient practice and community partnership. Immediate wins include (i) harmonized statutes and enforcement protocols, (ii) risk-informed conservation with hydrological controls and emergency stabilization kits, (iii) replication of integrated urban-heritage models, (iv) intangible heritage programs that fund knowledge bearers, and (v) low-cost, open digital baselines to monitor change. These moves protect outstanding universal value while enabling sustainable local development. UNESCO World Heritage Centre walledcitylahore.gov.pk

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