



What is Worth Preserving in Digital Archiving? Community, Consent and an Exploration of the Psychology of Preservation

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Abstract

This research critically examines the epistemological, ethical, and methodological dimensions of digital archiving in the preservation of Kashmiri cultural heritage. Anchored in the central question-what is worth preserving in digital archiving?- The study interrogates how intangible and vernacular heritage practices are engaged, contested, or excluded in technologically mediated preservation efforts. Utilizing a qualitative ethnographic framework, the research incorporates seven semi-structured interviews conducted through a publicly accessible podcast series on Spotify, each of which explores the psychology of preservation from intergenerational, gendered, and community-based perspectives. Complemented by field documentation at historically and spiritually significant sites in Srinagar, the study identifies persistent patterns of resistance to visual documentation, particularly in sacred spaces. These refusals are not seen as obstacles but as expressions of cultural self-respect-showing a desire to control how traditions are represented, protect spiritual spaces, and build trust in how archiving is done. The research evaluates the affordances and limitations of digital tools-including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, 3D mapping, and open-access community platforms-through the lens of critical heritage studies and decolonial methodology. Findings suggest that while these technologies offer preservation potential, their implementation often reproduces extractive paradigms unless grounded in participatory and values-led approaches. This study contributes to the broader discourse on intangible heritage, postcolonial memory, and community-based archiving by advocating for preservation as an ethical, dialogic, and negotiated process. It calls for a reconfiguration of digital archiving as a co-constructed practice, one that resists authorized heritage discourses and centers lived experience, affective knowledge, and cultural self-determination.

Keywords: *Community; Consent; Psychology of Preservation*

Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Project

The accelerated erosion of cultural heritage in conflict-affected regions has prompted a re-evaluation of both the tools and ethics of preservation. In the case of Kashmir-a region marked by

prolonged political instability, environmental degradation, and socio-religious stratification-heritage preservation has become a critical and contested domain. This study centers on Safar Dar Watan, a digital archiving initiative that engages with the question: What is worth preserving in digital archiving? The project seeks to document endangered cultural elements in Kashmir while foregrounding ethical, community-led modes of engagement. As articulated in the field report, the project was launched not merely as an archival intervention, but as a “digital tapestry” composed of oral histories, traditional arts, architecture, communal memory, and narrative resistance. Access limitations due to gender-especially for women researchers-were not simply logistical barriers but illustrative of deeper spatial politics within heritage practices. These exclusions provided insight into the power-laden dynamics of visibility and access in sacred spaces and are discussed further in thematic analysis.

Rather than treating heritage as a static repository of artifacts, Safar Dar Watan approaches it as a living process embedded in memory, trust, and spiritual meaning. The archive includes podcast interviews conducted with individuals across generational and occupational lines including academics, artisans, religious leaders, and community reporters who function as informal cultural experts. These narratives are interwoven with fieldwork conducted at five architecturally and spiritually significant sites: Aali Masjid, Budshah Tomb, Akhund Mullah Shah Mosque, Khanqah-e-Moula, and Jamia Masjid. Each site presented unique challenges to documentation, with patterns of resistance emerging in response to perceived surveillance, gender exclusion, and representational anxiety. These findings underscore that preservation is not merely about technical documentation but about relational accountability and epistemic respect.

The project also integrates a digital infrastructure that invites participatory contributions through a “Contribute an Item” interface. While this feature may appear procedural, it embodies the project’s epistemological commitment to democratizing legacy without compromising cultural sovereignty. As such, Safar Dar Watan does not replicate institutional hierarchies of value, but instead turns heritage into a co-authored process.

1.2 Relevance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to critical heritage studies, particularly within the domains of postcolonial memory, intangible culture, and digital ethics. In contrast to conventional heritage preservation models-which often prioritize monumental architecture or elite objects-this research foregrounds vernacular traditions, affective knowledge, and community-defined value systems. The study draws on Smith’s concept of the Authorized Heritage Discourse, which critiques the tendency of state and institutional actors to privilege “aesthetically pleasing material objects” while marginalizing intangible and emotionally situated heritage. In Kashmir, this phenomenon is particularly acute. Governmental and tourism-focused preservation efforts have disproportionately focused on Mughal-era monuments while neglecting local crafts, oral traditions, and gendered spaces of memory.

This study also responds to emerging scholarship on the politics of documentation. As Baker et al. (2021) observe, the act of recording heritage has both an “audit function”-ensuring survival-and an “access function”-determining who can engage with that heritage (Baker et al. 85). However, as McKemmish et al. (2020) warn, documentation systems embed the “worldview, values, power structures, and ways of knowing” of dominant institutions, often alienating or erasing local knowledge systems. This concern is further echoed by Laurajane Smith, who argues that traditional archival systems disengage users “from the very real emotional and cultural work that the past does as heritage”.

In alignment with these critiques, Safar Dar Watan seeks to intervene in dominant heritage paradigms by constructing an archive that is dialogic, participatory, and ethically mediated. In doing so, it contributes to scholarly debates on cultural continuity, digital sovereignty, and decolonial archival practices.

1.3 Research Objectives and Key Questions

This study is structured around five interconnected research objectives, each of which addresses a critical dimension of preservation in digital and contested contexts:

1. To identify and evaluate *endangered*¹ cultural elements in Kashmir, with particular attention to their historical, spiritual, and communal significance. This objective interrogates the values that render certain practices and sites “worthy” of preservation and examines how resistance to documentation can serve as a mode of cultural assertion.
2. To analyze the affordances and risks of technological preservation tools, including digital archiving, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and 3D mapping. This includes an inquiry into how such tools may either support ethical documentation or replicate extractive practices.
3. To explore the consequences of cultural discontinuity, especially across generations, and how educational interventions, oral storytelling, and participatory platforms may re-establish transmission. Here, the study draws on Vansina’s emphasis on the fragility of oral traditions and their central role in cultural survival.
4. To examine how access to heritage is shaped by political, social, and gendered dynamics, including restrictions faced by women researchers in religious sites and the spatial politics that govern participation in memory work. The study engages with Foucault’s theory of heterotopias and Massey’s spatial analysis to understand these exclusions.

To reflect critically on the processes through which preservation decisions are made, focusing on who possesses the authority to document or deny documentation, and what ideological frameworks underlie these decisions. This objective aligns with Harrison’s critique of institutionalized heritage frameworks and emphasizes community epistemologies as valid forms of authority.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study encompasses both tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage in Kashmir, with a primary focus on sacred architecture, oral histories, crafts, poetry, music, and community narratives. Data collection was conducted across five heritage sites in Srinagar, supplemented by a seven-episode podcast series exploring individual and collective interpretations of cultural memory. The analytical lens incorporates heritage theory, ethnographic fieldwork, feminist geography, and digital humanities.

However, several limitations shape the parameters of this research. First, access to certain religious sites was restricted based on gender, particularly in Khanqah-e-Moula and Jamia Masjid, where women were barred from specific spatial zones. This spatial exclusion constitutes not merely a logistical challenge but a data point that reveals the gendered nature of heritage access. Second, the timing of the fieldwork during Ramadan intensified communal sensitivities, leading to heightened resistance to visual

¹ Endangered, in the context of cultural heritage, refers to practices, traditions, languages, or sites that are at risk of disappearing due to factors such as political conflict, environmental degradation, generational disconnect, commercialization, or lack of institutional support. The term highlights the urgency to document and sustain these elements before they are irreversibly lost.

documentation. This resistance was not perceived as incidental but interpreted as “a protective instinct, not merely a religious or logistical barrier”.

Third, the deployment of digital tools carries its own limitations, including risks of data extraction, cultural misrepresentation, and technological inaccessibility in remote communities. As Brown and Nicholas caution, digital heritage must avoid “institutional overreach” and ensure community consent and ownership over representational processes (Brown and Nicholas 307). Moreover, logistical constraints—including limited internet infrastructure, funding challenges, and a lack of trained personnel—complicate the effective implementation of high-tech preservation solutions.

Despite these limitations, the study affirms that the core question—what is worth preserving in digital archiving?—must be approached not only through technological solutions but through a relational, collaborative, and value-sensitive framework. In this context, preservation emerges as an act of negotiation, shaped by consent, co-authorship, and cultural self-determination.

2 Literature Review and Methodology

2.1 Literature Review

The preservation of cultural heritage through means of digital preservation which in this study include community-curated podcasting, participatory metadata generation, and resistance-aware documentation strategies that prioritize consent and emotional resonance over high-resolution imagery has emerged as a key focus in contemporary heritage studies, particularly in response to the accelerating threats posed by conflict, environmental change, and globalization. In the context of Kashmir—a region marked by socio-political contestation, military occupation or institutional classification and prolonged cultural dislocation—the act of documentation itself is deeply political. Existing literature emphasizes that preservation must move beyond the technical safeguarding of artifacts to include the ethical, epistemological, and affective dimensions of memory work.

Academic discourse on documentation consistently highlights its dual function: preservation and access. As Baker et al. (2021) argue, recording heritage materials fulfills an “audit function,” allowing for the management and transmission of heritage across generations, and an “access function,” democratizing engagement with cultural materials. This duality is particularly salient in digital contexts, where archiving is not limited to safeguarding objects but extends to questions of whose knowledge is included and how it is framed. The introduction of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and virtual simulation into heritage practice expands the reach of preservation efforts but also risks embedding existing hierarchies of visibility and legitimacy.

Indeed, scholars caution that documentation systems are not ideologically neutral. As McKemmish et al. note, the classification schemes and descriptive logics of archival practices often reproduce the “worldview, values, and power structures of the sociocultural and political mainstream,” thereby marginalizing indigenous or community-based epistemologies. This concern resonates with Laurajane Smith’s critique of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which privileges material, monumental, and aesthetically valued heritage while sidelining oral, affective, and experiential knowledge. Smith contends that this dominant discourse disengages both communities and scholars from the emotional and cultural labor inherent in heritage work, reinforcing institutional authority over lived memory.

These critiques are particularly pertinent to Kashmir, where heritage documentation has historically prioritized Mughal gardens, religious shrines, and other state-recognized sites, often at the expense of vernacular practices and community-led traditions. As the Safar Dar Watan archive demonstrates,

intangible heritage-including oral storytelling, poetic forms, local architecture, gendered rituals, and crafts-plays a central role in shaping Kashmiri identity but remains underrepresented in institutional records. Efforts to document this heritage are often met with suspicion or outright resistance, particularly when external actors are involved. This reflects what Vazira Zamindar describes as “gatekeeping” in postcolonial memory work-where only certain narratives are considered legible or legitimate (Zamindar 2007).

Additionally, technological advancements in heritage preservation-ranging from AI-based artifact restoration to immersive virtual experiences-have been the subject of both enthusiasm and critique. Hassani (2015) outlines the possibilities offered by 3D scanning, geospatial modeling, and digital recording in expanding the accessibility and longevity of heritage materials. For example, the restricted access to sanctums within the Khanqah-e-Moula demonstrates Foucault’s notion of heterotopias-real spaces governed by symbolic order-while Massey’s work helps unpack how such exclusions are reproduced socially and politically. However, this potential is accompanied by significant ethical and logistical concerns. The adoption of advanced tools in regions like Kashmir, where digital infrastructure is uneven and socio-political surveillance is pervasive, requires careful negotiation. Scholars like Brown and Nicholas (2012) warn that digital archiving, if not implemented with community consent and ethical safeguards, can replicate the extractive logics of colonial knowledge production, framing local culture as an object of study rather than a dynamic, living system.

In this regard, the concept of “community-led preservation” has emerged as a corrective to top-down, expert-driven models of heritage management. Baker et al. (2021) emphasize that preservation must be co-constructed through participatory methods that recognize local ownership and pluralistic knowledge systems. Their work with youth-led digital archiving in Iraq and Egypt exemplifies this shift, advocating for preservation models that respect data sovereignty and contextual nuance. For instance, in Iraq, the Tahrir Documents project-initially led by young volunteers during the 2011 protests-digitally collected, translated, and preserved political flyers, protest materials, and street literature to document grassroots narratives that would otherwise be excluded from official records. Similarly, the concept of “heritage from below,” as articulated by Iain Robertson (2012), calls for the decentralization of authority in heritage decisions, placing interpretive power in the hands of communities rather than institutions.

This research draws upon and extends these frameworks by examining how community resistance in Kashmir-especially refusals to be filmed or recorded-is not a rejection of value but a conscious assertion of custodial rights over cultural meaning. The study further integrates the idea of postmemory, as proposed by Marianne Hirsch, to account for how cultural memory is transmitted not only through physical preservation but also through affective, intergenerational relationships (Hirsch 2008). In Kashmir, where physical displacement and generational trauma are widespread, such non-material forms of heritage transmission become particularly significant.

Finally, gendered and spatial exclusions in heritage access are examined through feminist geography and spatial theory. Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopias is employed to interpret religious and sacred sites not as universally accessible locations but as spaces regulated by symbolic and social rules (Foucault 1986). Doreen Massey’s work further underscores that space is not neutral but socially produced and structured by power relations (Massey 1994). These insights inform the analysis of barriers faced by women researchers in Kashmir, including spatial prohibitions at shrines and mosques that limit both physical access and the capacity to document.

Collectively, this body of literature highlights the need for an ethically reflexive, politically informed, and community-centered approach to digital preservation in contested landscapes like Kashmir. It situates Safar Dar Watan as a critical intervention that not only documents endangered heritage but also interrogates the conditions under which preservation becomes possible, legible, and legitimate.

2.2 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, ethnographic methodology grounded in participatory action research (PAR) to investigate the ethical, technological, and communal dimensions of cultural preservation in Kashmir. The choice of PAR is informed by its emphasis on collaboration, co-production of knowledge, and responsiveness to local needs, particularly in contexts marked by marginalization and historical misrepresentation (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007). The methodology aligns with the broader aim of the Safar Dar Watan project: to develop a digital archive that is reflective of, and accountable to, the communities it seeks to represent.

2.2.1 Data Collection Methods.

The primary data sources include semi-structured interviews, ethnographic field observation, audio-visual documentation, and publicly accessible podcast episodes. Between March 13 and 17, 2025, field research was conducted at five historically and spiritually significant sites in Srinagar: Aali Masjid, Budshah Tomb, Akhund Mullah Shah Mosque, Khanqah-e-Moula, and Jamia Masjid. These sites were selected based on their historical relevance, architectural uniqueness, and active role in communal memory. Visual documentation was only undertaken with prior and explicit consent, often negotiated multiple times. Resistance was not treated as data void but as expressive of cultural boundaries. This aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) decolonizing methodologies, which center refusal as a legitimate act of knowledge protection.

Observational data was collected on site, with detailed field notes recorded to document both spatial dynamics and interpersonal encounters. Seven interviews were conducted and published in podcast format, focusing on community perceptions of heritage, memory, and preservation ethics.

2.2.2 Sampling Strategy.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, including artisans, religious custodians, youth, and academic practitioners. This strategy facilitated depth over breadth, allowing for nuanced exploration of preservation as lived experience. Special attention was given to capturing intergenerational and gendered differences in heritage engagement.

2.2.3 Ethical Considerations.

The research adheres to the ethical protocols set forth by the American Anthropological Association (AAA 2012), with a specific focus on informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and non-extractive engagement. Visual documentation was only undertaken with explicit permission, and participants were given the option to withdraw or anonymize their contributions. The study treats resistance to documentation as a meaningful form of data, consistent with Smith's theory of decolonizing methodologies, which emphasizes that refusal can be an assertion of sovereignty, not absence (Smith 2012).

2.2.4 Analytical Framework.

Data was analyzed thematically using grounded theory methods, with patterns coded around key categories: resistance and consent, technological mediation, gendered access, spiritual authority, and memory transmission. Theoretical constructs drawn from heritage studies, feminist geography, postcolonial theory, and digital humanities informed the interpretive framework. Triangulation was

employed by cross-referencing field data with podcast narratives, archival sources, and existing scholarly literature (Creswell and Poth 2018).

2.2.5 Technological Integration.

Digital tools such as podcasting, digital archiving, and user-contributed platforms were not only subjects of analysis but also active components of the research methodology. The “Contribute an Item” function on the Safar Dar Watan platform was piloted to evaluate participatory archival practices. In line with ethical digital heritage guidelines, these technologies were implemented following best practices for community ownership, consent-driven metadata, and data protection (Giaccardi 2012; Cameron and Kenderdine 2007).

2.2.6 Positionality and Reflexivity.

A reflexive stance was maintained throughout the research process to address potential power imbalances inherent in documentation. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Partha Chatterjee’s analysis of postcolonial community formation, the study interrogates how identity, authority, and knowledge production are negotiated in heritage work. The research foregrounds community epistemologies over institutional authority, in alignment with Rodney Harrison’s call for critical heritage practices that center marginalized voices (Harrison 2013).

In summary, the methodology employed in this study not only facilitates the collection of empirical data but also reflects a commitment to ethical, inclusive, and theoretically grounded research. By combining field observation, narrative inquiry, and digital experimentation, the study offers a holistic model for reimagining what it means to preserve culture in regions shaped by conflict, resistance, and resilience.

2

3 Historical and Cultural Context

The region of Kashmir, situated in the Himalayan borderlands and often described as a confluence of multiple civilizations, carries a layered and politically fraught history. Once a prominent center of Indo-Islamic, Buddhist, and Shaivite knowledge systems, Kashmir has long been characterized by its syncretic cultural identity. The region’s complex religious and philosophical traditions-ranging from the mystic poetry of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi to the sophisticated architectural practices of the Sultanate and Mughal periods-have contributed to a rich and evolving cultural heritage. However, contemporary preservation efforts must contend not only with the fragility of this legacy but also with the political contestations that frame how, why, and by whom it is preserved.



The cultural landscape of Kashmir is marked by complex intersections of memory, identity, and preservation. As scholars such as Laurajane Smith (2006) and Ann Stoler (2009) argue, heritage is never

² PHOTO CREDIT : US Central Intelligence Agency

neutral—it is always shaped by the frameworks through which it is curated and remembered. In contexts like Kashmir, where diverse religious, philosophical, and artistic traditions coexist, decisions about what is preserved, displayed, or forgotten often reflect broader cultural and institutional values. Stoler (2009) refers to this as the “politics of knowledge,” where archives and heritage sites become spaces that encode particular modes of legitimacy and belonging. Consequently, heritage in Kashmir cannot be viewed simply as a record of the past, but as a living and interpretive process shaped by affect, spatial practices, and intergenerational transmission.

Despite this, Kashmir remains a site of active cultural production. Sacred shrines, vernacular crafts, oral storytelling, and architectural practices continue to be central to the region’s social fabric. Yet these forms are increasingly endangered due to environmental degradation, economic shifts, intergenerational disconnection, and surveillance-based restrictions on public expression. The impact of climate change—manifesting in erratic weather, flood-prone urbanization, and material decay—has further threatened heritage infrastructure. These pressures intersect with religious and gendered exclusions that restrict access to certain knowledge systems, particularly for women and marginalized communities.

The field sites examined in this study exemplify these dynamics. Each structure—Aali Masjid, Budshah Tomb, Akhund Mullah Shah Mosque, Khanqah-e-Moula, and Jamia Masjid—carries centuries of historical significance, yet also reflects the limitations of current heritage discourses. These sites are not only architectural feats but also living institutions embedded in community life, ritual performance, and spiritual education. For instance, Khanqah-e-Moula, situated on the banks of the Jhelum River, is emblematic of the Rishi-Sufi tradition in Kashmir. Although widely visited, it remains governed by spatial and gendered hierarchies, with women’s access to prayer and documentation restricted to certain peripheral zones.

Similarly, Jamia Masjid, one of the largest and oldest mosques in Srinagar, represents a critical locus of religious, political, and architectural heritage. However, field notes indicate heightened surveillance and control in its vicinity, particularly during congregational prayers. This environment has cultivated a cautious approach to documentation, where custodians frequently cite the need for respect, spiritual integrity, and consent before permitting any form of recording. These restrictions should not be misconstrued as anti-modern or regressive; rather, they represent an assertion of cultural sovereignty and a refusal to allow sacred spaces to be subjected to detached visual consumption.

Moreover, the region’s craft traditions—such as woodcarving, papier-mâché, carpet weaving, embroidery and calligraphy—are facing rapid decline. Artisans interviewed in the course of this study expressed concerns over both declining intergenerational transmission and the commodification of their work through external market forces. One artisan, in an interview, remarked that “our work is seen as tourist décor, not as heritage.” This sentiment underscores a critical insight: heritage is not merely what survives, but what is allowed to remain meaningful. Preservation, therefore, must consider not only the object but also the context, intention, and worldview of its custodians.

Cultural memory in Kashmir is also sustained through oral traditions, particularly storytelling, proverbs, poetic forms such as marsiya and naat, and familial teaching. These affective modes of transmission are vital to maintaining identity under conditions of dispossession and trauma. As Marianne Hirsch suggests in her work on postmemory, the transmission of memory is not limited to firsthand experience; it also travels through images, narratives, and embodied knowledge across generations (Hirsch 2008). In Kashmir, where state narratives often exclude or distort local histories, such forms of cultural remembrance take on political urgency.

Religious spaces in Kashmir are uniquely positioned within these dynamics. They are not only places of worship but also centers of community gathering, spiritual pedagogy, and cultural preservation.

However, as Foucault's theory of heterotopias posits, these are also regulated spaces, structured by norms that determine visibility, inclusion, and access (Foucault 1986). For female researchers, as recorded in this study, these spatial dynamics manifest in differential access to heritage. Women are frequently excluded from key documentation zones within shrines, leading to gaps not only in scholarly representation but also in archival visibility. This exclusion necessitates new methodological strategies that acknowledge silence, refusal, and absence as forms of data rather than mere limitations.

Importantly, the study's temporal frame—the month of Ramadan—further influenced field dynamics. Increased religiosity, heightened spatial regulation, and communal sensitivities shaped both the logistics and ethics of research. These conditions reinforced the need for a documentation process that is not extractive or intrusive but anchored in respect, dialogue, and temporal awareness.

In sum, the historical and cultural context of Kashmir demands a preservation model that moves beyond institutional checklists and colonial-era taxonomies. Heritage in this context is not merely an inventory of objects, but a field of relational knowledge, spiritual affect, and political negotiation. The *Safar Dar Watan* project situates itself within this terrain—not to render culture visible through datafication alone, but to co-create an archive that honors the stakes of memory, consent, and cultural endurance.

4 Project Description, Thematic Analysis, and Findings

4.1 Project Description

Safar Dar Watan is a community-rooted digital archiving initiative aimed at exploring the question: *What is worth preserving in digital archiving?* It focuses not only on endangered material culture but also on affective, narrative, and spiritual practices that are often excluded from mainstream heritage models. The project combines site-based fieldwork with a public podcast series to develop a multimodal archive grounded in consent, participation, and cultural specificity.

The field component³ involved documentation at five architecturally and spiritually significant sites in Srinagar—Aali Masjid, Budshah Tomb, Akhund Mullah Shah Mosque, Khanqah-e-Moula, and Jamia Masjid. These locations were selected based on their embeddedness in collective memory, ritual practice, and vulnerability to neglect or distortion. Rather than merely cataloguing these spaces, the project sought to understand how they are lived, remembered, and contested. In many instances, community members expressed discomfort with visual documentation—particularly photography and video—preferring oral or ambient modes of preservation. These refusals were treated not as barriers but as significant data points that informed the archive's ethical framework. As Laurajane Smith (2006) notes, heritage is “a cultural process,” not simply a collection of things. In that sense, refusal itself became a form of authorship, revealing boundaries of trust, representation, and spiritual sanctity.

Complementing the fieldwork, a seven-part podcast series hosted on Spotify gathered intergenerational perspectives on memory, cultural loss, and transmission. The interviews—conducted with artisans, teachers, students, and spiritual practitioners—offered rich insight into how heritage is understood and practiced in everyday life. The podcast format was chosen deliberately to center voice, tone, silence, and cadence as forms of cultural expression. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory, the paper understands storytelling and oral transmission as acts of inheritance that exceed archival logic.

³ Refer to page 25, for plotting of various locations visited on the map. The full length documentary on the field trip is for public access on the Youtube channel - “Safar Dar Watan”.

The archive also includes a participatory submission interface—*Contribute an Item*—which allows community members to upload materials they deem valuable, such as photographs, voice notes, or memory fragments. This feature reflects a shift from hierarchical preservation models to dialogic and co-authored forms of archiving. McKemmish et al. (2020) emphasize that participatory metadata and vernacular description systems help “foreground the values and worldviews of marginalized communities,” a principle embedded in *Safar Dar Watan*’s design.

Overall, the resists the notion of preservation as a neutral or purely technical act. It approaches heritage as a relational process—mediated by emotion, ethics, and context—and seeks to build a digital infrastructure that honours cultural sovereignty, affective knowledge, and the right to opacity.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

The paper’s findings are organized around five interrelated themes that emerged consistently across interviews, site visits, and observational data: (1) refusal and sovereignty, (2) ethics of visibility, (3) affective preservation, (4) gendered geographies of access, and (5) technological tensions.

4.2.1 Refusal and Sovereignty

One of the most salient patterns observed during the fieldwork was the recurrence of refusals to permit documentation—especially at Khanqah-e-Moula and Jamia Masjid. These refusals were not isolated incidents but part of a broader expression of cultural sovereignty. Community members often articulated concerns around misrepresentation, commodification, and spiritual violation. In one interaction, a caretaker stated, “It is not the camera that we fear, it is the gaze behind it”. This articulation underscores a critical point: refusal is not a barrier to heritage work but a form of custodial authorship.

Scholars such as Smith (2012) and Brown and Nicholas (2012) argue that resistance to documentation should be understood as an epistemic intervention, whereby communities assert the right to define how, when, and by whom their heritage is preserved. Within *Safar Dar Watan*, refusal is treated not as an absence of data, but as meaningful data itself—an index of power, trust, and affective investment in cultural spaces.

4.2.2 Ethics of Visibility

Closely related to the theme of refusal is the ethical complexity surrounding visual documentation. In sacred spaces, particularly those with Sufi affiliations, participants repeatedly emphasized that certain elements of religious life are not meant to be visually captured. “Spiritual presence cannot be photographed,” remarked one elderly respondent during a conversation outside Budshah Tomb. The visual register—central to many digital heritage projects—thus becomes inadequate or even inappropriate in certain contexts.

The paper responds to this concern by decentering the visual in favor of audio, spatial mapping, and oral narrative. The seven podcast episodes act as alternative archival modes that preserve the cadence, emotional tenor, and reflective silences of participants—elements often lost in visual media. In this way, the archive aligns with Hirsch’s (2008) framework of postmemory, where the transmission of cultural experience operates effectively and acoustically, rather than through conventional documentation techniques.

4.2.3 Affective Preservation and Memory Transmission

One of the paper's core findings is that preservation in Kashmir is as much about emotional continuity as it is about material survival. Elders interviewed in the podcast episodes expressed concern that "language, values, and feeling are disappearing faster than monuments" (Interview 2, 2025). Participants often described memory transmission not through institutional means but via home-based teaching, storytelling, and spiritual mentorship.

This insight challenges institutional preservation models that prioritize material artefacts. In contrast, the Safar Dar Watan archive highlights how family rituals, religious recitations, and narrative retellings form the bedrock of cultural survival. These intangible practices are deeply interwoven with affective labor and must be recognized as primary forms of heritage. The field documentation captured this sentiment through ambient audio recordings—mosque prayers, shrine chants, and market sounds—integrated into the archive to preserve the emotional atmosphere of heritage spaces.

4.2.4 Gendered Geographies of Access

A recurring limitation during fieldwork was the gendered restriction of access at religious sites. At Khanqah-e-Moula, women—including female researchers—were permitted to access only the outer periphery of the shrine. Similar limitations were observed at Jamia Masjid, where photography was explicitly prohibited for female visitors. These spatial exclusions reflect Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias—spaces that are real but structured by symbolic rules and power relations.

Doreen Massey's (1994) concept of spatial politics further clarifies how these gendered dynamics are not anomalies but integral to the way cultural authority is constructed and sustained. For the purposes of this project, such exclusions were not seen as logistical setbacks but as analytical data. They revealed how access to heritage is stratified along gender lines, often rendering women's memory work invisible in formal archival processes. Consequently, Safar Dar Watan incorporates oral narratives by female participants to foreground these marginal perspectives.

4.2.5 Technological Tensions and Community Trust

The introduction of digital tools—such as AI transcription, 3D mapping, and open-source metadata systems—was met with both optimism and skepticism. While some participants expressed interest in the potential of digital platforms to safeguard heritage, others feared that such tools could be misused or manipulated. Concerns ranged from data privacy to representational integrity. "Technology does not understand intention," one interviewee observed, highlighting the epistemological limitations of digital mediation (Interview 5, 2025). This ambivalence resonates with ICCROM's (2022) call for context-sensitive technological intervention in heritage work, which warns against "innovation without ethics" in conflict-prone regions.

This ambivalence reflects broader critiques in digital heritage studies, where technological optimism often overlooks the social and political implications of datafication. As Giaccardi (2012) argues, digital heritage must be embedded within relational and ethical frameworks to avoid re-inscribing asymmetrical power dynamics. Safar Dar Watan attempts to respond to these critiques by ensuring that all technological interventions—metadata tagging, platform design, AI transcription—are governed by principles of consent, transparency, and local control.

4.3 Findings

The thematic analysis yielded several overarching findings that advance current understandings of heritage preservation in contested and culturally sensitive regions:

4.3.1 Preservation is a relational and affective process, not merely a technical operation. Effective documentation must engage with the emotional, spiritual, and political meanings of heritage practices.

4.3.2 Community refusal is a legitimate and critical archival position, reflecting concerns about spiritual intrusion, misrepresentation, and historical trauma. Digital archives must develop ethical protocols that recognize and respect these refusals.

4.3.3 Audio and oral modes of archiving may offer more culturally congruent alternatives to visual documentation in certain religious and spiritual contexts. The success of the podcast interviews suggests that preservation strategies should be multimodal and responsive to local epistemologies.

4.3.4 Technological tools are not neutral instruments; their use in heritage preservation must be guided by community-defined ethical standards. Without these safeguards, digital archiving risks replicating colonial and extractive knowledge systems.

4.3.5 Gendered and spatial exclusions are structurally embedded in heritage practices and must be addressed through methodological innovations that amplify marginalized voices and challenge representational hierarchies.

Collectively, these findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship that reimagines heritage preservation as an ethical, participatory, and politically situated practice. By centering community voices, honoring spiritual boundaries, and embracing non-visual forms of knowledge transmission, Safar Dar Watan offers a model for decolonial and value-sensitive digital archiving.

Conclusion

The question that animated this research—What is worth preserving in digital archiving?—has evolved, over the course of this study, into a deeper interrogation of the very frameworks through which heritage is recognized, valued, and transmitted. In the context of Kashmir, a region shaped by layered histories, contested sovereignties, and enduring cultural resilience, preservation cannot be reduced to technical replication or institutional control. It is a relational, ethical, and epistemological process—one that demands attentiveness to power, positionality, and affect. This project, Safar Dar Watan, was conceptualized and implemented not merely to archive cultural materials, but to interrogate how and why certain cultural forms are made legible while others are excluded, refused, or silenced.

Through an integrated methodology that combined ethnographic fieldwork, audio documentation, and participatory design, the research surfaced patterns of resistance, reconfiguration, and community-led innovation. Five primary findings emerged from the thematic analysis: the assertion of refusal as a form of custodial sovereignty; the ethical limits of visual documentation; the centrality of affective and oral forms of transmission; the gendered geographies of heritage access; and the double-edged role of digital tools in preservation.

What became clear through both field interactions and podcast interviews is that the community's relationship to preservation is not one of passive receptivity, but of active negotiation. Refusal to be photographed, restricted access to sacred spaces, and skepticism toward technological mediation were not signs of regression or insularity. Rather, they reflected a sophisticated understanding of the politics of

visibility, the gendered dimension of these exclusions—especially the experiences of female participants barred from central mosque spaces—demonstrates the invisibilization of women in formal heritage curation. However, as feminist geography argues, domestic and informal spaces where women share, sing, and teach constitute vital epistemological archives. This paper attempted to legitimize these as memory sites, the vulnerability of sacred knowledge, and the historical misuses of documentation as a tool of surveillance and extraction. These refusals must therefore be understood not as impediments to the archival process, but as integral to its ethical recalibration. As scholars like Smith (2012) and Harrison (2013) have argued, preservation is never neutral—it is always situated, selective, and ideological.

Younger participants often described a disconnect from traditional practices but expressed renewed interest when invited into co-creation processes like the archive. Memory flowed not through institutional history but through mothers' storytelling, shared cooking rituals, and whispered prayer—supporting Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory and validating domestic space as a site of feminist epistemology.

The broader literature in critical heritage studies supports this argument. McKemmish et al. (2020) and Giaccardi (2012) warn against the reproduction of colonial logics through digital systems that prioritize legibility over consent and classification over context. The findings of Safar Dar Watan reinforce this concern: the promise of digital preservation must be tempered by a commitment to community-led epistemologies, affective legitimacy, and the right to silence. Digital tools are only as ethical as the relationships that govern their use. When deployed without dialogue or reflection, they risk flattening the very cultures they seek to preserve.

One of the paper's most significant methodological contributions lies in its foregrounding of non-visual modes of archival practice. By centering audio—through a publicly accessible podcast series—Safar Dar Watan offered a culturally congruent and ethically sound alternative to visual capture in sensitive religious spaces. The resonance of oral storytelling, tone, rhythm, and silence proved more effective in conveying the depth of cultural emotion and memory than photographs or videos might have achieved. This shift toward acoustic archiving builds on Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory and expands it to include sonic inheritance as a legitimate form of heritage transmission.

The incorporation of community-submitted materials through the “Contribute an Item” feature further emphasized the value of participatory infrastructure in archival design. This feature resisted the hierarchies embedded in conventional heritage curation and allowed contributors to define the terms, contexts, and meanings of what they shared. It marked a shift from preservation for communities to preservation with communities—an ethos central to decolonial archival theory.

A crucial ethical and political insight that emerged from the paper is the layered nature of access. As Massey (1994) and Foucault (1986) have demonstrated, space is always produced through power. In Kashmir, sacred architecture is often governed by spatial regimes that restrict entry based on gender, sect, or political affiliation. These exclusions structure not only who can access heritage, but who can document it, interpret it, and transmit it. In response, this study does not attempt to “correct” exclusion through forced visibility, but rather to acknowledge and work within its terms. Where documentation was not possible, absence itself became a form of data. This methodological stance reflects a commitment to respecting epistemic boundaries, acknowledging that what is hidden or withheld may be as valuable as what is revealed.

The implications of this study extend beyond Kashmir. In heritage contexts shaped by fragility, conflict, and cultural resistance, preservation cannot be understood as a neutral act of safeguarding. It must be framed as a practice of relational accountability. The findings of Safar Dar Watan suggest that effective preservation requires more than advanced tools or institutional frameworks; it requires

emotional intelligence, historical humility, and ethical imagination. It demands that researchers and technologists not only ask what should be preserved, but also how, why, and for whom.

Preservation is never neutral. Decisions about what is documented, who documents, and how it is presented are shaped by state agencies, religious boards, and elite families. Following Chatterjee and Spivak, this project challenges the assumption that institutional voice is inherently more credible and repositions subaltern expressions as epistemically robust. The findings have potential implications for heritage policy and practice. In line with ICOMOS's "Principles on Indigenous Heritage" and ICCROM's guidelines on community-led conservation, Safar Dar Watan suggests that ethical digital preservation must be grounded in consent frameworks, flexible metadata practices, and culturally embedded documentation methods. These insights could inform India's implementation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention on Intangible Heritage.

Moving forward, the study opens several pathways for future research and action. First, it calls for the development of ethical guidelines for visual and sonic documentation in sacred contexts, co-authored with community custodians. Second, it suggests the need for capacity-building in community-led digital literacy, to support self-directed preservation initiatives. Third, it highlights the importance of integrating feminist and postcolonial theory into archival pedagogy, so that future practitioners are equipped to navigate the politics of memory with sensitivity and rigor.

Most importantly, this paper affirms that heritage is not simply what survives conflict-it is what communities choose to carry forward, often in defiance of erasure. It is preserved not only in objects and monuments, but in stories whispered between generations, prayers recited in the absence of light, and refusals that protect the sacred from spectacle. Safar Dar Watan is both archive and argument: it insists that preservation must be ethical before it is digital, communal before it is technical, and relational before it is representational.

In asking what is worth preserving, this research does not seek a definitive list or universal standard. Instead, it offers a framework-grounded in consent, care, and cultural specificity-for thinking about preservation as a process of collective decision-making. In doing so, it contributes to a necessary reimagining of digital archiving: not as a tool for freezing the past, but as a medium through which communities negotiate continuity, express agency, and shape the futures they wish to remember.

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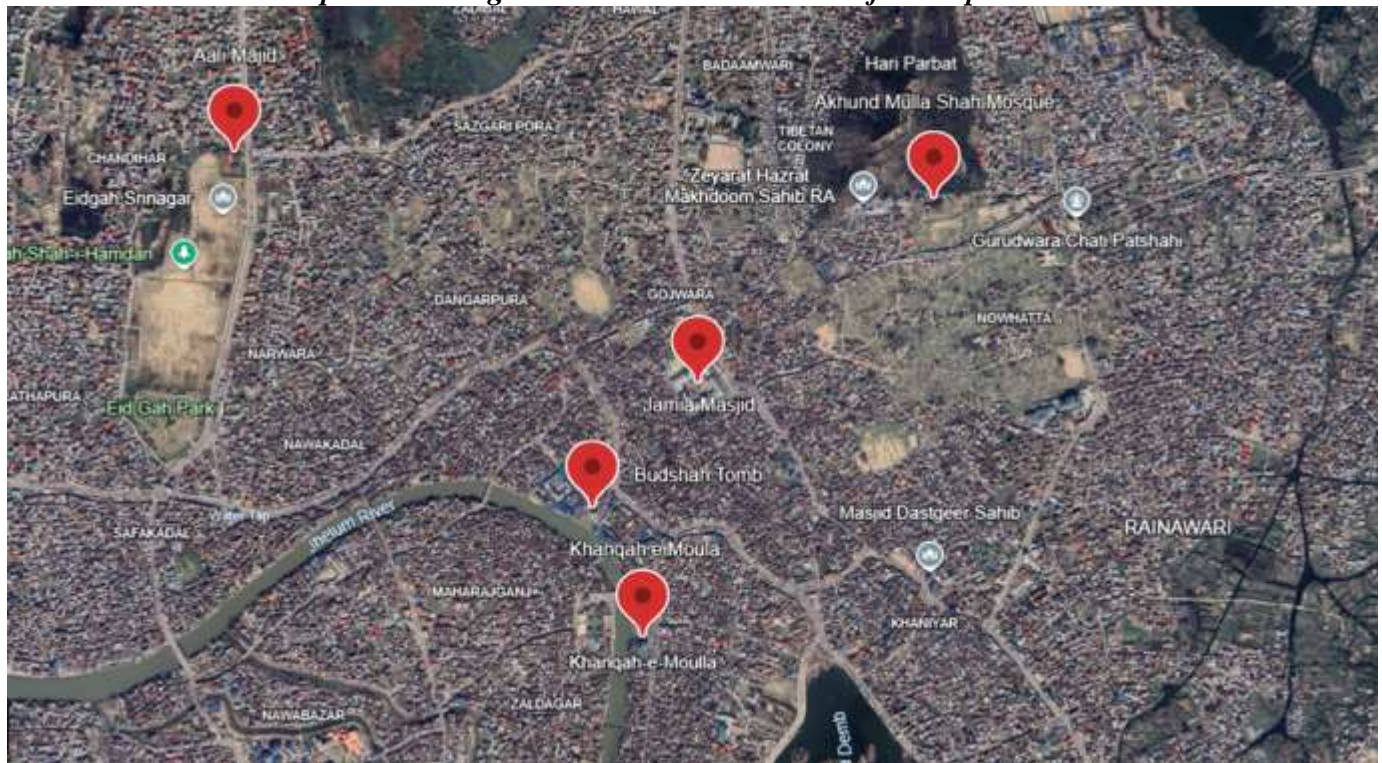
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Map Showcasing the locations visited on the field trip



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