

## Unveiling the Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: A Historical and Architectural Analysis of Gujranwala's Heritage

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### Abstract

The Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Gujranwala stands as a notable monument, revered as the birthplace of Ranjit Singh. The structure displays architectural influences from both Mughal and Rajput styles, particularly evident in its domes, kiosks, and arches. Currently, the haveli is in a state of severe deterioration, requiring urgent restoration. To transform it into an appealing tourist destination, enhancements such as paintings or mosaics depicting the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh are suggested to be applied on the panels, columns, and blind arches. Moreover, the presentation of the integrating geometrical motifs and illustrations from the Sikh Manuscripts, especially those pertaining to the Maharaja, into the haveli's grand hall, are also recommended. Despite its inconspicuous location in a narrow street, the haveli's visibility can be improved through directional signage detailing Ranjit Singh's life and achievements. The adjacent bazaars offer opportunities for the tourists to purchase local souvenirs while immersing themselves in Gujranwala's architectural heritage. The qualitative research methodology is adopted for this paper by employing both primary



and secondary resources such as photographs, books, journals, interviews, site visits, and literature reviews. The objectives of this paper are to record the historical background, architectural features, current condition, thus insists and aim at providing the ideas for the restoration and ornamentation of the haveli in order to preserve the rich heritage while simultaneously elevating its allure to the tourists.

**Keywords:** Haveli, Ranjit Singh, Architecture, Gujranwala's heritage

### **Introduction and Background**

Gujranwala hosts a remarkable history of architecture built by Sikhs. The city is situated on both sides of the Grand Trunk Road (G.T. Road) from Rawalpindi to Lahore. It is flanked by the key cities: Lahore to the south, Sialkot and Gujrat to the north, and Faisalabad to the south-west. "It ranks as the third largest industrial center in the country, after Karachi and Faisalabad. It occupies this position mainly due to the availability of raw material and skilled labour here. Gujranwala, Gujrat and Sialkot make the 'Golden Triangle' of the division, playing important role in national economy."<sup>1</sup> Despite the historical significance of the haveli Ranjit Singh at Gujranwala, most of the people do not know about it, even those who live nearby or belong to the Sikh descent are not aware of its role as the birthplace of Ranjit Singh. The city holds significant Sikh architectural legacy including Haveli of Charat Singh, Samadhi of Charat Singh, Sheraanwala Bagh, Haveli of Hari Singh Nalwa and Samadhi of Mahan Singh alongside numerous *gurdwaras*. It proudly upholds Punjabi traditions, earning its moniker as the 'City of Wrestlers, or *'Pehlwanaan da Shaher'*. It is also famous for its dairy production and culinary delights like *Chiray*, which gives it a distinctive charm. Gujranwala's accessibility, facilitated by the Grand Trunk Road and British-era railway tracks, has fueled its population growth over time. Although its exact origins are shrouded in mystery, it is believed to have been

founded by *Gujjars* in the 18th Century. “It may have been established as a village in the middle of the 16th century. Locals traditionally believe that Gujranwala's original name was Khanpur Sansi, though recent scholarship suggests that the village was possibly Serai Gujran instead - a village once located near what is now Gujranwala's Khiyali Gate that was mentioned by several sources during the 18th Century invasion of Ahmad Shah Abdali”<sup>2</sup> Following the demise of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, Mughal authority weakened rapidly, notably after Nader Shah's 1739 invasion, and eventually faded from the Punjab region due to Ahmad Shah Abdali's repeated invasions between 1747 and 1772. Abdali's grip on the area began to falter in the late 18th Century with the emergence of Sikh Misl, independent chieftainships, overtaking Punjab. Charat Singh of the Sukerchakia Misl established himself in Gujranwala between 1756 and 1758. Ranjit Singh, was born in Gujranwala in 1780 and initially made it his capital upon ascending to power in 1792.<sup>3</sup> Under Ranjit Singh, Sikhs emerged as a powerful political unit. Ranjit Singh (13 November 1780 – 27 June 1839) served as the inaugural leader of the Sikh Empire, governing the northwest Indian subcontinent during the early 19th century. He was born into a Sandhawalia Jat Sikh family to Maha Singh and Raj Kaur. He participated in his first battle alongside his father at the age of 10, and after his father's passing during his teenage years, he remained engaged in numerous conflicts. He inherited his father's Sukerchakia Misl<sup>4</sup> estates and was raised by his mother Raj Kaur, who, along with Lakhpat Rai, also managed the estate during his teenage. He fought many battles after his father. At age 18, his mother died and Lakhpat Rai<sup>5</sup> was assassinated, and thereon he was helped by his mother-in-law from his first marriage. Throughout his life, he confronted various illnesses, including surviving smallpox during infancy resulted in the loss of sight in his left eye and a pock marked face. He is

popularly known as 'Sher-e-Punjab' or 'Lion of Punjab' due to his bravery and exemplary performance.<sup>6</sup>

His birthplace, known as Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, stands as a testament to his legacy, albeit in a state of disrepair. However, with restoration efforts, its former glory could be revived, offering a poignant reminder of Gujranwala's rich heritage for Sikh and other visitors alike. (The images included in this paper are all captured by the author unless otherwise specified).

### **Literature Review**

Ranjit Singh, the sole heir of Maha Singh, became the king of the Sukerchakias, a prominent Sikh group, after his father's death. "His inheritance included Gujranwala town and the surrounding villages, now in Pakistan. At 15 he married the daughter of a chieftain of the Kanhayas, and for many years his affairs were directed by his ambitious mother-in-law, the widow Sada Kaur. A second marriage, to a girl of the Nakkais, made Ranjit Singh preeminent among the clans of the Sikh confederacy."<sup>7</sup> He was praised for his respect for other religion people. Many of his conquests were achieved by Punjabi army that has many Hindu, Muslim and Sikh soldiers.<sup>8</sup> This review delves into Ranjit Singh's historical context, bridging gaps in contemporary literature by focusing on the historical background, current conditions and comes up with the ideas of restoration. Upon assuming power in 1792, Ranjit Singh designated Gujranwala as his capital. Under the leadership of Hari Singh Nalwa, a celebrated military strategist from Gujranwala, the city witnessed significant fortifications, including a formidable mud wall and an organized grid street layout. However, the capital was relocated to Lahore after Ranjit Singh's conquest of the city from the Durrani Afghans in 1799, leading to Gujranwala's gradual decline in prominence.<sup>9</sup> In the article *Historical Perspective of Urban Development of*

*Gujranwala* by Neelum Naz and Sabih-ul-Hassan Zaidi, Mahan Singh's contributions to Gujranwala's infrastructure are highlighted, particularly the construction of boundary-fixing towers and the inception of Sheranwala Bagh, adorned with lion statues. Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa (1791-1837) was an admirer of nature, thus beautiful gardens were made during his time period, especially the gardens of oranges. This new town is polygonal in shape and has a grid pattern of roads. It has a bazaar with more than 500 shops. The mausoleum of Mahan Singh is also present at this city.<sup>10</sup> *Empire of the Sikhs: The Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh* authored by Patwant Singh and Jyoti M. Rai offers a comprehensive biography of Ranjit Singh, portraying him as a towering figure in Indian history known for his charisma and dedication to justice. The book not only delves into Ranjit Singh's life but also sheds light on the intricate political dynamics of his successors and their exploitation by the British.<sup>11</sup> *Remnants of the Sikh Empire: Historical Sikh Monuments in India and Pakistan* by Bobby Singh Bansal delves into the rich architectural legacy left behind by the Sikh Empire, spanning from grand forts to intricate *havelis* and sacred *gurdwaras*. The book meticulously documents these monuments, offering insights into their historical significance and cultural importance. Bansal's narrative not only highlights the architectural splendor of these sites but also delves into the socio-political context in which they were built. Through vivid descriptions and captivating photographs, the book provides readers with a captivating journey through Sikh history and culture. It serves as an invaluable resource for exploring the enduring legacy of the Sikh Empire's architectural wonders.<sup>12</sup> In the article *Reviving the Forgotten, Diminishing Glory of Sikh Heritage: A Case Study of Haveli Ranjit Singh Gujranwala, Pakistan*, the author Ayesha Ahmad and Faiqa Khilat discuss about the various views of the Haveli Ranjit Singh. They also discuss about the historical background of the place and provide pictorial evidences of its current situation. They describe

the importance of the place and promote the idea that it needs the restoration.<sup>13</sup> Recent reports, such as *Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Haveli in Pakistan Collapses* published in The Tribune, underscore the pressing need for immediate action to salvage the deteriorating heritage site. Despite its protected status by the archaeology department, extensive restoration is imperative to ensure the preservation of this.<sup>14</sup>

### **Analysis of the Haveli and its Architecture**

Haveli Ranjit Singh is nestled amidst a bustling bazaar including the Machli market and the shops of silver and gold jewelers. The area is quite busy due to narrow streets and a lot of people visiting the place because of the availability of almost every daily routine item in the market. Despite the fact that a huge crowd can be seen in the surroundings, people are not aware of the Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It is surprising that even local Sikhs are oblivious to the presence of this significant landmark.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Sheranwala Bagh is famous there that beholds a *baradari* which is misunderstood as the birthplace of Ranjit Singh. However the haveli is not so far from the *bagh* and located almost half a kilometer from there (Figure I). "Just outside the Sheranwala bagh near the north eastern corner and visible from the garden itself, is the Samadhi of Mahan Singh (died 1790), father of Ranjit Singh. It is located at 32° 09' 23.21" N, 74° 11' 19.67" E."<sup>16</sup> The marvelous architecture of the haveli attracts the attention in the first look but the presence of the broken floor, garbage, dry leaves and stems are reminiscent of the dire need of attention for cleanliness, repair, restoration and necessary arrangements for its ornamentation and decoration. The architecture and its reference to the historical background of Ranjit Singh make it an attractive site and with little effort this historical gem can be revived into a captivating heritage site.

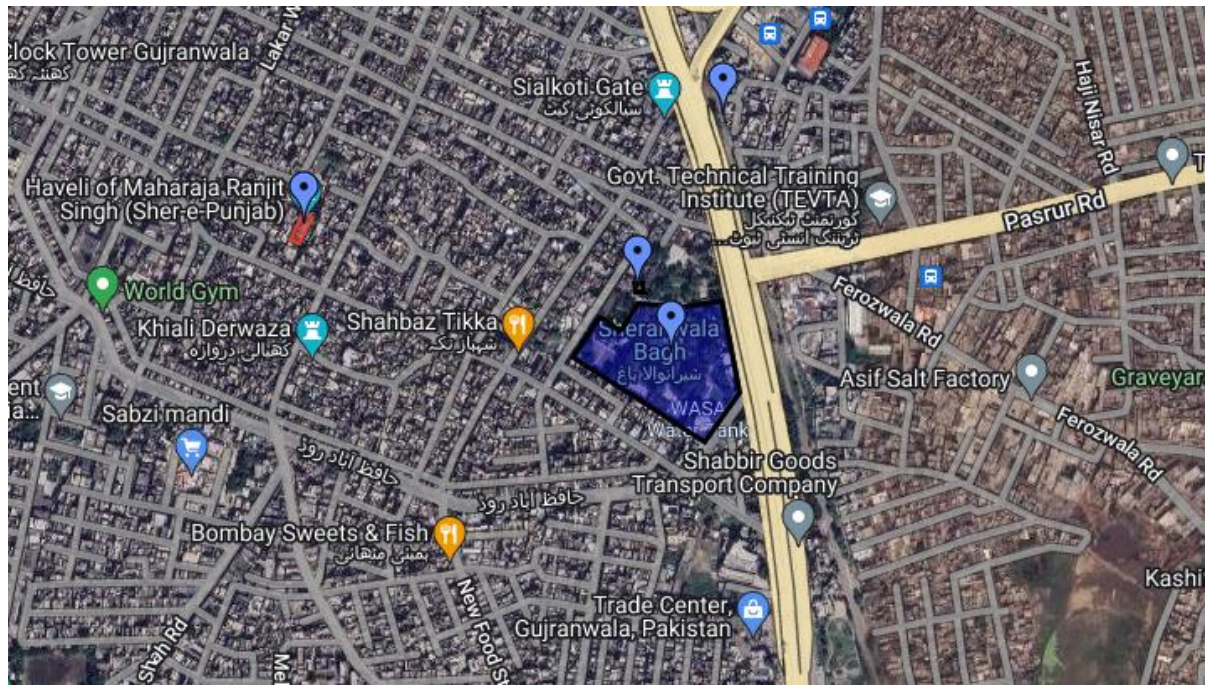


Figure 1: Map of Gujranwala showing G.T Road, Sheranwala Bagh and Haveli Ranjit Singh, Gujranwala. source:

[https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=IVqW-4Q5ZQccLHHv2QbDfcmCGcOQ&hl=en\\_US&ll=32.15617004056228%2C74.18936736350707&z=16](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=IVqW-4Q5ZQccLHHv2QbDfcmCGcOQ&hl=en_US&ll=32.15617004056228%2C74.18936736350707&z=16)

### Entrance and Main Façade

The haveli characterized by its elongated rectangular shape is positioned in a north-south alignment that is slightly angled towards the northeast, in accordance with the dominant orientation of Gujranwala's urban layout.<sup>17</sup> It is a single story building which is elevated 8 feet higher from the background on a platform. Its north-south alignment allows fresh air to come forth and pass through the windows and doors of the haveli.

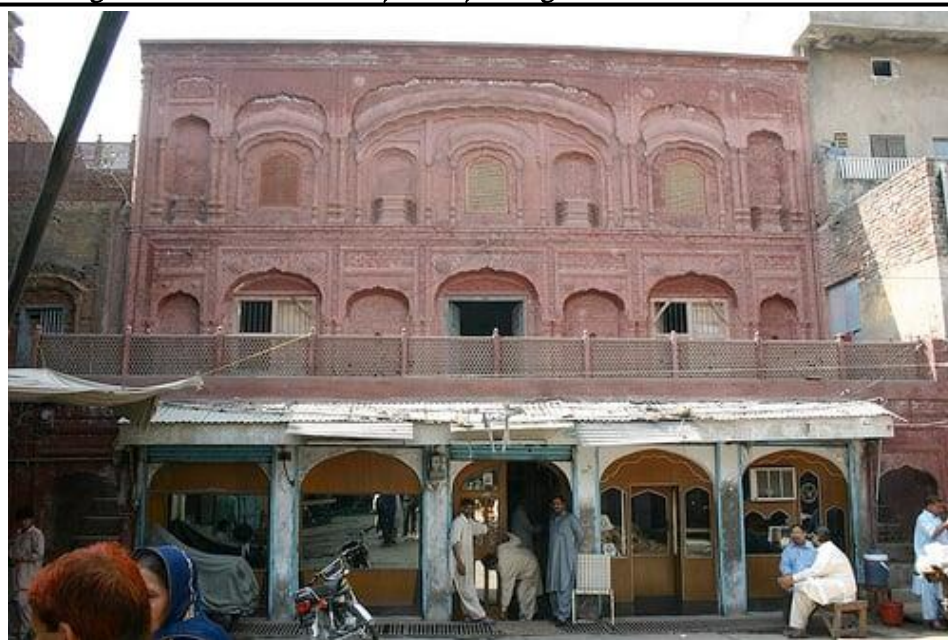


Figure 2: Main Facade of Haveli Ranjit Singh, Source:  
<https://www.hindujagruti.org/news/I5366.html>

The main façade faces south and is made of red bricks and plaster, inset with wood (Figure 2). It faces a bazaar which is very difficult to access by car, thus the pedestrian route is preferred. “Like Mughal-era buildings, the surface is organized as a bilaterally symmetrical series of rectangular panels, separated from one another by ornamental engaged columns spanned with cusped arches. A shallow niche sits below each of the arches on the ground floor and upper level, alternately filled with brick benches, arched windows, and a single entranceway. The large bay over the main entrance includes the profile of several gently curving bangala style roofs, a fashion that came into vogue in Shah Jahan's era when the conquest of east India (today's Bangladesh) brought this form to the Mughal Empire's attention.”<sup>18</sup>

**Main Big Hall and its Current Condition:**

After climbing the stairs there is an open space followed by a wooden door that opens into a hall which is in the state of dilapidation and filled with unnecessary bricks and mud. The lanterns are fallen from the roof which looks in danger of falling at any time. The lanterns are standing diagonally on the floor which can probably be positioned for a rebuilding purpose which is not accomplished since yet (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Lanterns from the roof of main hall

Inside, there are blind arches and windows with wooden doors. Some arches are open without doors or *jalis* thus allows the dirt, water, insects and birds to enter freely into the haveli. The sky is peeping out of the roof in a drastic way due to the broken bricks that can fall on the head of the visitor, if not repaired immediately. The hall also has piles of bricks and debris which needs to be sided and removed to avoid further damage. It opens into a larger courtyard after a verandah and that leads towards another courtyard, comparatively smaller in size, both courtyards are open to the sky.

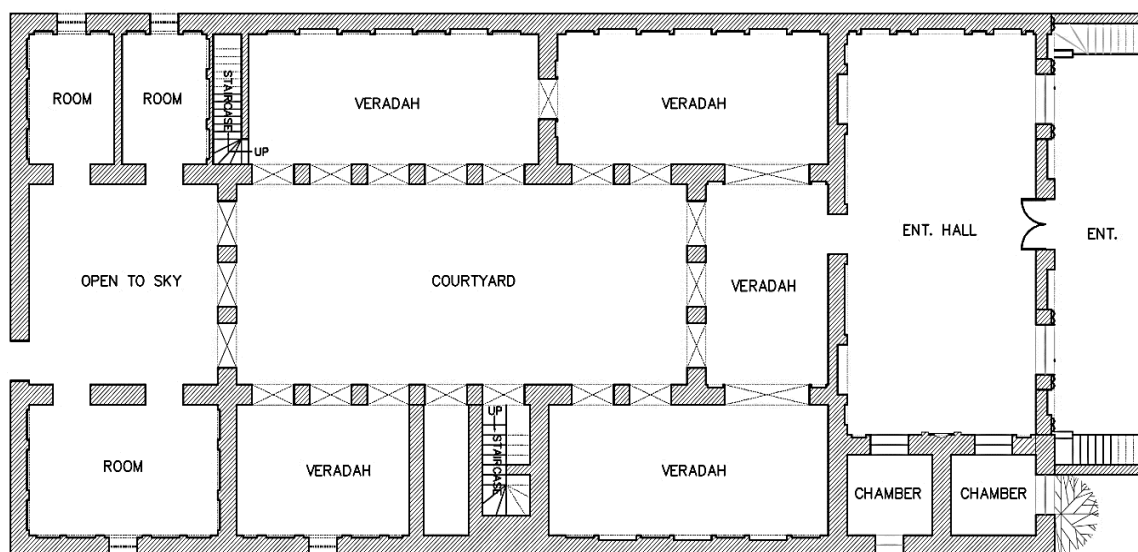


Figure 4: Upper Ground Floor Plan. Source:

[https://www.academia.edu/109910581/Reviving\\_the\\_Forgotten\\_Diminishing\\_Glory\\_of\\_Sikh\\_Heritage\\_A\\_Case\\_Study\\_of\\_Haveli\\_Ranjit\\_Singh\\_Gujranwala\\_Pakistan](https://www.academia.edu/109910581/Reviving_the_Forgotten_Diminishing_Glory_of_Sikh_Heritage_A_Case_Study_of_Haveli_Ranjit_Singh_Gujranwala_Pakistan)

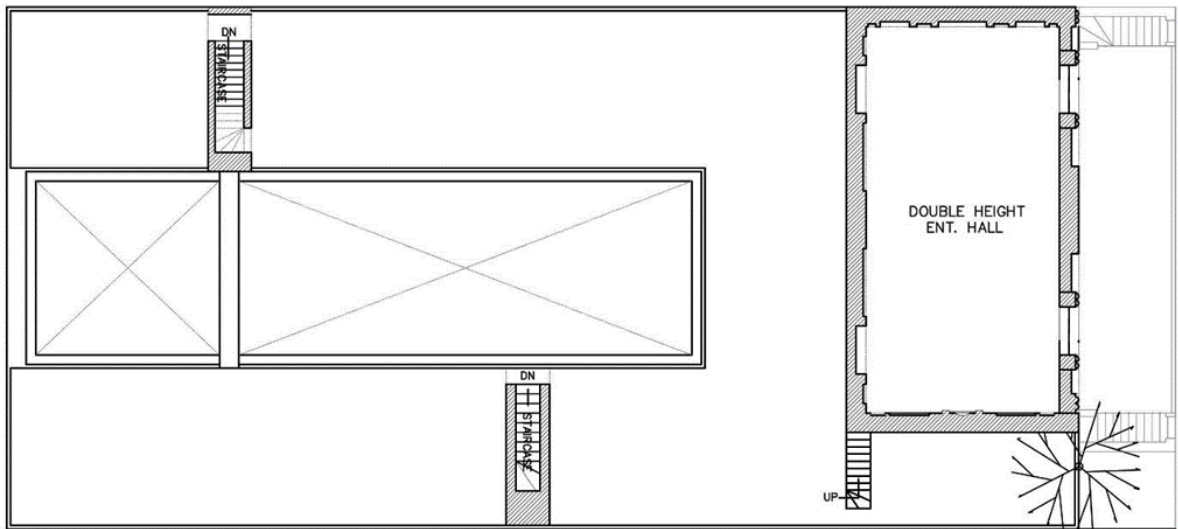


Figure 5: First Floor Plan. Source:

[https://www.academia.edu/109910581/Reviving\\_the\\_Forgotten\\_Diminishing\\_Glory\\_of\\_Sikh\\_Heritage\\_A\\_Case\\_Study\\_of\\_Haveli\\_Ranjit\\_Singh\\_Gujranwala\\_Pakistan](https://www.academia.edu/109910581/Reviving_the_Forgotten_Diminishing_Glory_of_Sikh_Heritage_A_Case_Study_of_Haveli_Ranjit_Singh_Gujranwala_Pakistan)

### The First Courtyard

After the main hall, there are two courtyards flanked by the rooms (Figure 4). The grandeur of the structure, attached columns and structure of red brick soothes the eyes and gives a historical overview of the place where one can feel the presence of history in the air with effects of people roaming around due to the vacant space and because of the inter connections of halls and rooms. There are two staircases in this area, one at the right side and the other at the left (Figure 5). These are slightly terrifying to climb as there is nobody around, not only because of the feathers, birds, stems and leaves

hanging from different places but also because of the terror that a broken part can come under the feet and cause damage.

There are around 20 open arches with clustered columns formed between arches, around this courtyard. The rooms have blind arches but there are no decorative motifs or paintings enhancing the elegance and beauty of the place, which is required. The open arches with clustered columns are used to reach the second courtyard (Figure 6).



Figure 6: View of the first courtyard, seen from the second courtyard through arches

### The Second Courtyard

The second courtyard has two rooms at the right side among which one has the marble slab outside and above its door (Figure 7 & 8) which is translated as:

(Birthplace Maharaja Ranjit Singh Brave Sir  
Date of Birth 2 November 1780)



Figure 7: Marble slab depicting the date of birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh



Figure 8: The image is cropped from a picture from the source depicting the details of the slab. Source:

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/641903753121507590/>

There is a big room at the left side. The courtyard is open to the sky and has a door that opens outside the haveli in an open space (Figure 9). This door is also used as the entrance now a days due to comparatively save passage to get inside, easy access (no stairs or fallen roof at entrance) and also because a neighboring man has the access to open the lock and closes it after the visit. While entering from this door, the mesmerizing architecture beholds the attention and its similarities with Mughal architecture and its relevance with the Sikh time period just created the aura of a historical nuance where once

the family of Ranjit Singh and his related persons were roaming and now the place is empty and vacant, thus requires attention (Figure 10).



Figure 9: Rear Door of haveli used as the present-day entrance



Figure10: Courtyard of the Haveli. Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1786227>

### **Current Condition of the Haveli**

The building is in dire need of attention in terms of construction, maintenance and restoration (Figure 11 & 12). Despite its poor condition, the architectural features have the same elegance that is part and parcel of historical architecture of South Asia either built by Mughals, British or Sikhs. The roofs, particularly the one above the staircase and the entrance hall, are leaking and broken, often filled with leaves and nests. Additionally, severe damage is evident on the floors, especially in the left side room of the first courtyard, where the floor is fragmented and riddled with cracks, posing safety hazards to visitors. There are rumors among locals about the presence of an underground passage (*surang*) leading to Sheranwala Bagh, though its authenticity requires verification by architectural and building authorities. If proven true, this passage, after maintenance, could enhance visitors' experience. The walls are full of cracks and exhibit severe damage (Figure 13). Overgrown plants on the roofs (Figure 14) and trees growing inside and

outside the haveli are causing damage to the walls, while accumulated filth and encroachments need immediate removal. The haveli has become a gathering spot for children playing cricket and drug-addicted individuals seeking refuge, deterring potential visitors. This also stops the visitors to visit this place as mostly the families enjoy going to the places that are protected and where they can find the food stalls and clean water easily to enjoy and remain safe. The open vents in rooms allow rainwater to seep in, further damaging the walls and resulting in cracks and muddy water lines. Though attempts at wall cementing and whitewashing have been made, they do not contribute to the restoration effort and detract from the haveli's grandeur. Overall, the structure is not yet at the risk of demolition, but the restoration efforts are essential, alongside potential expansion to improve access and transformation of the area.



Figure 1 I: Broken roof of the Main Entrance Hall



Figure I2: Need to clean extra and broken material



Figure 13: Broken walls and floor of the rooms



Figure 14: Leaves hanging from the holes on the roof of the staircase

### **Suggestions for the Restoration**

Since the haveli is in a restorable condition, there are some suggestions that can be useful to transform this place into a tourist attract while preserving its historical significance and enhancing its features through images and written drafts. Key recommendations include:

#### **Professional Restoration**

Qualified professionals should be engaged to repair the building and to preserve its architectural features from historical times with special care.

#### **Landscaping**

Remove unnecessary plants and create a well-designed garden surrounding the haveli to enhance its aesthetic appeal.

**Fountains:** Install fountains in courtyards to attract visitors and provide a soothing ambiance, particularly during summers.

**Repair Vent Holes:** Open vent holes and broken windows should be repaired with detailed wooden replacements, ensuring structural integrity and aesthetic cohesion (Figure I5)

**Safety Inspection:** Conduct a thorough inspection to ensure the building's structural stability and safety for visitors.

**Tunnel Exploration:** Explore the rumored tunnel's existence and, if found, repair and potentially open parts for visitor exploration.

**Surrounding Area:** Clean and convert illegally occupied areas into green lawns, enhancing the haveli's surroundings and visitor experience.

**Guidance Signage:** Erect guiding notes around the building, Grand Trunk Road, and *Sheranwala Bagh*, facilitating easy access and navigation for visitors.

**Drainage Improvement:** Clean and improve the drainage system to prevent waterlogging and maintain the haveli's structural integrity.

**Artistic Enhancements:** Paint in the main hall arches with images of Ranjit Singh and his family, adding specificity to the Maharaja's legacy. Fill the blind arches in haveli with paintings or mosaics depicting significant life incidents or victories of Ranjit Singh (Figure I6 & I7).

### **Floor Repairs**

Uneven floors should be repaired (Figure 18). Cheap materials, added within times, should be changed with suitable bricks, maintaining the structure's elegance while preserving authenticity.

### **Cleanliness**

The accumulated filth and broken materials should be removed to restore the haveli's original charm and cleanliness.

**Mosaic Art:** Add mosaics in blind arches of the last courtyard, portraying Ranjit Singh and an equestrian statue amidst a fountain, accentuating the haveli's beauty and historical significance



Figure 15: Open vents should be closed to avoid further damage



Figure I6: Mosaics can be added in the blind arches and niches



Figure I7: Mosaics and paintings can be added into the rooms with blind arches



Figure I8: Broken Floor

These comprehensive restoration efforts aim to transform the haveli into a prominent tourist destination, attracting not only Sikhs but also enthusiasts keen on experiencing the life and history of Ranjit Singh through the haveli's architecture and visual depictions. Here are some suggestions for the mosaics and paintings related to the life of Ranjit Singh. The whole series, covering his life span and achievements, can be painted along with portraits in large size (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Paintings and mosaics that can be reproduced for the ornamentation of structure along with many more, Source:

<https://lahoremuseum.punjab.gov.pk/sikh-gallery>

### **The Importance of the Location**

Situated near the Grand Trunk road and the renowned Sheranwala Bagh, the haveli holds significant historical value. With numerous Sikhs residing in the vicinity and several gurdwaras in Gujranwala, it has the potential to become a prominent destination for Sikh pilgrims, particularly for those who visit the Samadhi of Ranjit Singh annually. Additionally, its proximity to key historical sites makes it an ideal location for history enthusiasts. If restored in line with the aforementioned suggestions, the haveli could offer a comprehensive glimpse into Sikh history.

### **Benefits of Restoration**

The restoration of the haveli will help developing heritage tourism and provide educational possibilities. It will also stimulate economic growth in the city. The place can also be used for interactive discussions and exhibitions after necessary changes. The restoration will employ principles of constructivism to empower visitors in constructing their comprehension of Haveli Ranjit Singh. It will facilitate the hands-on learning experience and encourage developing profound connections to its rich legacy.

### **Conclusion**

Haveli of Ranjit Singh at Gujranwala has a historical significance and its architecture reminds us of the Sikh times with similarities with their ancestors. The place is not preserved and the changes with the passage of time have brought serious damage to its architecture. The significant historical place with the bells of the history ringing in the courtyards is diminishing gradually. The surroundings with a Machlibazar, rush of people, narrow streets and no boards to identify the place has made it a place in disguise where even the shopkeepers and Sikhs living in the surroundings are not

aware of this building amidst local *bazaar*. This research covers the history of Ranjit Singh with his achievements along with the analysis of the architecture through site visit. The reasons of its bad conditions are sorted out and the suggestions are given to improve the structure. It is also suggested that the architecture of the building should be repaired by professionals and a lawn can be added in the surroundings for its vastness and suitability for the visitors.

The suggestion of adding the mosaics and painting works depicting the portraits, life history scenes, war scenes and scene from the manuscripts depicting Ranjit Singh in a chronological order will make it a more attractive tour site not only for the Sikhs but for all the people who visit it. A route can be arranged with possible safety measures for the Sikhs who visit Ranjit Singh Samadhi at Lahore every year and the relevance of the birthplace, with added material for its beautification, will prove it to be an aesthetically appealing site that will glorify the life span of Ranjit Singh while educating the people about the history of their era.

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- <sup>3</sup> Same as above
- <sup>4</sup> The Sikh Confederacy (also known as Misl, derived from the Arabic word **مِثْل** meaning 'equal'; sometimes spelt as Misal was the confederation of the twelve sovereign states which rose during the 18th century in the Punjab region in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent and is cited as one of the causes of the weakening of the Mughal Empire prior to Nader Shah's invasion of India (1738–1740).
- <sup>5</sup> Raj Kaur was assisted by Dewan Lakhpat Rai (the Dewan of her late husband) who is reputed to have acted with ability and enthusiasm.
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<sup>15</sup> Result of a discussion with a passing by Sikh and other people, who were not aware of the haveli among the shops.

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