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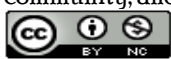
SIKH HERITAGE IN GUJRANWALA: HISTORY, PRESERVATION, AND TOURISM POTENTIAL OF A SHARED CULTURAL LEGACY

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Gujranwala, Sikh heritage, gurdwara, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, heritage preservation, heritage tourism, pilgrimage tourism, ETPB	ABSTRACT The city of Gujranwala in Punjab Province of Pakistan holds a unique and relatively neglected position in the history and heritage of the Sikhs. Being the birthplace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the founder of Sikh Empire and the place of significant holy places visited by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, this city houses a great number of heritage places for the Sikh faith, culture and architecture. Following the Partition of India in 1947 and subsequent near total relocation of Sikhs from this region, there has been left behind a considerable amount of heritage material, which, since then, has been neglected, encroached upon, repurposed or deteriorated. Based on field observations of 12 principal Sikh heritage sites of the contemporary Gujranwala district, supplemented with interviews of site caretakers, construction workers and locals and research of primary and secondary sources, this research explores historical significance, present state and preservation problems of the Sikh heritage in this region. It suggests that these heritage sites should be considered not only the religious heritage of Sikhs but also the cultural heritage of Punjab. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the role that these places could play in terms of heritage and pilgrimage tourism provided there is better conservation, interpretation, accessibility, and institutional coordination. The conclusion drawn from this research is that it would be necessary for the conservation of the Sikh heritage of Gujranwala to adopt an integrated approach in which the state institutions, local community, and diaspora of Sikhs should be involved.
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Introduction

Gujranwala is a city in the Punjab province of Pakistan, situated around eighty kilometers from Lahore city towards the North of Grand Trunk Road (Ali, Rehman, & Shabbir, 2021). Situated in north-eastern Punjab, Gujranwala has significant importance in terms of politics, religion and culture in the region. Lying in the path of Grand Trunk Road which links Lahore and Rawalpindi, it has Sialkot and Wazirabad cities to its north and Faisalabad city to its south-west (Naz & Zaidi, 2013).

For the Sikhs, the gurdwara in addition to being a place of worship has historically been an important centre of social and cultural activities. The gurdwaras have been used not only as places of worship but also as religious schools, free kitchens (langar), community help centre and place of collective memory (Pakistan PTPC, 2025; Travel-Culture, 2020). Sikh public life has been closely linked with religious festivities such as processions, kirtan, community meals, Gurpurabs, Baisakhi and Diwali (Gupta, 2008). Historically, the Baisakhi celebrations have taken place in Gujranwala and Eminabad cities, where Baisakhi has assumed socio-economic significance due to the agricultural and cattle markets (Kabir. M, personal communication, March 18, 2026).

The historical legacy of Sikhs in Gujranwala district can roughly be categorized into three sets of places, each reflecting a distinct aspect of Sikh history in the area. The first set includes places found in Gujranwala city, which are significantly connected to the ruling lineage of Sukerchakia family and the rise of Sikh empire. This set includes Samadhi of Mahan Singh, Samadhi of Charat Singh, Haveli and Janamasthan of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Haveli and Janamasthan related to General Hari Singh Nalwa, Sheranwala Bagh Baradari, and Gurdwara Damdama Sahib. All these monuments collectively make up a significant physical evidence of the political and dynastic history of the Sukerchakia family that started from being a regional misl and ended up being the rulers of the Sikh Empire. Recent literature on the history of Gujranwala has also highlighted the importance of Charat Singh, Mahan Singh, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh in making Gujranwala a significant Sikh political/administrative centre prior to British annexation (Ali et al., 2026).

The second cluster of historical gurdwaras is found in Eminabad, an old name for Saidpur, about fifteen kilometres away from Gujranwala. These include Gurdwara Rori Sahib, Gurdwara Chakki Sahib, and Gurdwara Khooi Bhai Lalo. All these places are significant since they keep alive the memories related to Guru Nanak Dev Ji. They are significant due to the fact that they help establish connections between the district on one side and the history of the Sikh Empire as well as the religion of Sikhism on the other side. The third cluster includes the rural and semi-urban locations that lie outside Gujranwala city and Eminabad. These include gurdwaras connected to the travels of Guru Hargobind Sahib, traditions associated with Guru Arjan Dev Ji, and the memory of Bhai Lalo. Some of them include Guru Kotha Sahib at Mattoo Bhaike, Guru Kotha Sahib at Kotli Bhaga, and Gurdwara Panjvin Patshahi Chak Ram Das (Rehman. A, personal communication, March 08, 2026). These three groups together illustrate that Sikh heritage in

Gujranwala does not belong to only one single centre of monuments but it is spread out in urban, sacred and rural sites.

Preservation of the religious and minority heritage since 1947 partition is an issue which is highly relevant for the understanding of Pakistan's cultural landscape. Historically, Punjab has always been one of the main geographical and cultural centers of Sikhism. Many gurdwaras, samadhs, havelis and other constructions of Sikh period can be found in the cities and villages of Punjab. There are many different states of these buildings: they can be active pilgrimage sites or be abandoned, inhabited, repurposed or dilapidated. Sikh shrines, which have been recently documented in other cities of Punjab, Pakistan, draw attention to the long-term effects of displacement, adaptation to new functions, decay and loss of the collective memory after 1947. In this larger context Gujranwala plays an important role. This city was the political centre of Sukerchakia Misl and the capital of the emerging Sikh Empire and it was the birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who was born in 1780 (Ashraf et al., 2021, p. 29). The combination of all these three heritages make Gujranwala have the capacity to develop into one of the sites of pilgrimage and heritage tourism in the country. This is evidenced by the conservation activities carried out at Gurdwara Rori Sahib in Eminabad and also the emphasis being put on religious tourism by the government.

Literature Review and Research Methodology

Literature Review

Despite the considerable significance of Gujranwala in the politics, religion, and architecture of the Sikhs, there have not been many sustained academic works specifically focused on the Sikh heritage of the region. While the available literature is quite important, it either focuses on the local sites or addresses broader concerns of Partition, urban history, or cultural change, without considering the state of the Sikh heritage in this district.

The works of Qaiser (1998), which is considered a good source on documenting the Sikh religious sites of Pakistan, and Chattha (2011), *Partition and Locality: Violence, Migration, and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot, 1947-1961*, represent some of the major sources of knowledge on the issue. Utilizing police reports, intelligence files, district gazetteers, and oral histories, Chattha analyzes the processes of communal violence, migration, settlement of refugees, and land holding and urban changes that occurred in the area following 1947.

There have been some more recent publications that have focused on the built heritage of Gujranwala. *Reviving the Forgotten, Diminishing Glory of Sikh Heritage: A Case Study of Haveli Ranjit Singh Gujranwala, Pakistan*, written by Ahmad and Chaudhary (2023), looks into issues of structural decay, vandalism, encroachment, and conservation of the Haveli of Mahan Singh. This current research is complemented by the findings provided by Ahmad and Chaudhary (2023) because it reveals the ongoing efforts of rehabilitation of this structure.

Recently, some new research has shifted the conversation from one building to broader themes. Rana et al. (2025) explore the non-Muslim and secular heritage of the walled city of Gujranwala

and focus not only on structural decay but also on possibilities of cultural tourism associated with the preservation of cultural heritage. It is relevant for this research project because it provides background to the discussion about Sikhs heritage and its potential use in cultural tourism.

Similarly, Ali et al. (2026) also offer a more general reconstruction of the history of Gujranwala prior to its incorporation into British Punjab, giving attention to the formation of the Sukerchakia Misl and the significance of Charat Singh, Mahan Singh, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh in making Gujranwala an important Sikh polity and administration centre.

Nevertheless, the existing literature is highly scattered. Some researchers pay attention to the process of Partition, some to individual monuments, and still other researchers examine the urban heritage of Gujranwala. Only few researchers try to combine historical analysis with the fieldwork concerning several Sikh monuments in Gujranwala, assessing their current state and their potential as heritage and pilgrimage tourism sites. The current research tries to fill this gap by analysing Sikh heritage at a district level.

Research Methodology

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative historical and field-oriented, supported by an ethnographic component. There are three main methodologies used in this study: on-site visitations and observations, semi-structured interviews, and a primary and secondary documentary review.

First, field visits have been made to 12 key Sikh historical sites located in Gujranwala district in the current geographic context. These visits helped evaluate the condition, architecture, accessibility, usage, and preservation of each of the sites. Specific emphasis has been put on any signs of physical deterioration, encroachment, adaptation to new purposes, land use around, construction or renovation work, and association of the monument with its current urban or rural context. These include Haveli & Janamasthan of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Samadhi of Mahan Singh, Samadhi of Charat Singh, Sheranwala Bagh Baradari, Gurdwara Damdama Sahib, sites related to General Hari Singh Nalwa, Gurdwara Rori Sahib, Gurdwara Chakki Sahib, Gurdwara Khooi Bhai Lalo, Gurdwara Khara Sahib Mattoo Bhaike, Guru Kotha Sahib at Kotli Bhaga, and Gurdwara Panjvin Patshahi Chak Ram Das. Secondly, interviews, along with informal discussions were held with people available in and around the sites including locals, custodians of sites, and construction workers engaged in repairing and renovating the sites. These interviews were mainly meant to elicit the information regarding any change in the condition, utility, accessibility, and management of the sites. Thirdly, the field data was situated in its context by reviewing both primary and secondary sources including gazetteers of the district, historical works, journal articles, government documents, reports from institutions and national newspaper reports. Through triangulation of observations, interviews and documents, it will be possible to compare the importance of the monument historically with its current state and the response towards preservation by institutions. Thus, not only does the methodology aim at describing individual monuments, but it will allow for the examination of the heritage of Sikhs in Gujranwala as a whole

landscape, which is both historical and cultural. This methodology will make it possible to evaluate the link between preservation, access and memory.

Samadhi of Sardar Charat Singh

Charat Singh was one of the key figures behind the emergence of the Sukerchakia Misl, and Charat Singh played a vital part in making Gujranwala the political headquarters of the Sukerchakia Misl. After he consolidated his influence in the region, Charat Singh made Gujranwala his base, and as a result, Gujranwala came to be known as the capital of the Sukerchakia Misl (Latif, 1994, p. 338). Recent studies on pre-colonial Gujranwala have pointed to the significance of Charat Singh in turning Gujranwala into a significant site for Sikh administration.

This being the case, the samadhi of Charat Singh should have had adequate institutional protection by now. In reality, the samadhi is situated in the premises of the police station and is not easily accessible to heritage tourists, academic researchers, and general visitors. Physical isolation of the samadhi from the rest of the heritage sites of the city has also meant that the site lacks visibility in the broader context of Gujranwala's heritage. It is not protected by the Antiquities Act 1975 and is not included in any active institutional heritage register (Qureshi, 2016). The ongoing inaccessibility of such a vital monument is an indication of a broader issue faced by Gujranwala where historically significant structures belonging to the Sikh era exist in tangible form but are disconnected from heritage management.

Janamasthan of General Hari Singh Nalwa

Hari Singh Nalwa (1791-1837), who was born in Gujranwala, emerged to become one of the most influential military leaders of the Sikh Empire (Qaiser, 2011, p. 392). Moreover, he was a person linked to the architectural developments and urban planning in Gujranwala during the Sikh era. According to various historical sources, Hari Singh Nalwa's residence and garden in the city were significant architectural complexes. Moreover, later travellers such as William Barr and Baron Charles Hügel described the scale and qualities of his house and garden. Recent academic research also highlights that Nalwa's residence is one of the important remaining structures of Sikh era architecture in Gujranwala (Ali et al., 2026).

Umdat-ut-Tawarikh also talks about the construction activities of Hari Singh Nalwa in Gujranwala and mentions his involvement in the construction of the Samadhi of Mahan Singh in 1836 (Suri, 1961, p. 154). His house, which is known as a qilla, was located in the Kasayra Bazaar area. Later, due to Partition, an immigrant from Ludhiana, Ghulam Rasool, settled in the place (Qaiser, 2011). In the meantime, however, the structure has been substantially transformed through adaptive reuse. Singh (2018) mentions its conversion to a madrasa in 2013; such conversion has resulted in a significant change in the original Sikh-era architecture of the building. Later studies about the walled city indicate that the house belonging to the famous Sikh military commander, Hari Singh Nalwa, has been repurposed for religious activities, thus illustrating how pre-Partition non-Muslim heritage structures in Gujranwala have been repurposed over time (Rana et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the structure is of high importance

historically due to its association with one of the key military personalities of the Sikh Empire. As a part of an appropriately arranged Sikh heritage trail, this structure will be able to make connections between itself and other sites related to Sikh period of the city, such as the birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sheranwala Bagh, Samadhi of Mahan Singh, and others (Rana et al., 2025).

Samadhi of Mahan Singh

The Samadhi of Mahan Singh is among the historically important Sikh monuments found in Gujranwala. This monument was built on the orders of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and designed by General Hari Singh Nalwa (Rana et al., 2025). Built in Sheranwala Bagh, this octagonal monument is an example of Sikh architecture with Mughal influence. The significance of the monument for religious purposes lasted until the twentieth century. The Sikh pilgrim Dhanna Singh mentions in his travel account that the Guru Granth Sahib is read in the centre room during his visit on 9 October 1932 (Qaiser, 1998).

However, the current state of this samadhi is a stark contrast with its historic significance. The previous reports already pointed out the deterioration of the building and destruction of murals, walls, and lower rooms of the monument, stating that the monument needed conservation (Rana et al., 2025). Moreover, the present field research shows the deterioration of the monument. Due to the heavy rains in the year of 2024, part of the octagonal base was damaged, threatening the adjacent school and making the monument inaccessible to visitors. While restricted access may be justified due to safety reasons, this cannot be a substitute for immediate structural stability and conservation efforts. As of the field survey period, there were no signs of any ongoing conservation effort at the samadhi despite promises made regarding its renovation. The closure of the samadhi, combined with the structure being fragile and difficult to access, makes this site one of the highest priority sites when it comes to conservation within the Sikh heritage landscape of Gujranwala (Bakhash. K, personal communication, April 25, 2026). However, considering that this samadhi is situated in the greater context of Sheranwala Bagh, the site possesses great potential as part of a Sikh heritage trail. A recent study has suggested including Samadhi of Mahan Singh along with the birthplace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other Sikh-period structures in Gujranwala into this trail.



Fig.1 Samadhi of Mahan Singh (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 2 The crumbling samadhi of Mahan Singh (Photo: Madiha Abbas)

Sheranwala Bagh Baradari

Baradari of Sheranwala Bagh stands out among the best preserved and easily accessible surviving monuments associated with the Sukerchakia dynasty of Gujranwala. The baradari, an iconic twelve-bay open pavilion with three entrances on all four of its sides, is an architectural type typical of Sikh-Mughal garden architecture. It was constructed by Mahan Singh Sukerchakia and was the focal point of Sheranwala Bagh, the royal garden owned by the royal household (Singh, 2016). It has retained its significance for the Sukerchakia family even during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In 1838, an entire village's tax revenues were dedicated for the maintenance of the Samadhi of Mahan Singh and Sheranwala Bagh, which is an indication of continuing importance of this monument (Suri, 1961). Among other monuments of the Sikh period in Gujranwala, Baradari of Sheranwala Bagh is better preserved physically and easily accessible for people. This is notable because numerous monuments of the Sikh heritage in this area have deteriorated physically and are either closed for visitors, repurposed for different uses or damaged architecturally. The recent study of the walled city too recognizes Sheranwala Bagh and the Baradari as important elements of Gujranwala's Sikh-period cultural heritage and underlines the significance of this heritage within the larger context of conservation and tourism potential of the city (Rana et al., 2025). It still remains a public landmark, rather than an isolated archaeological monument, and sometimes functions as a venue for cultural events (Akhter. A, personal communication, March 8, 2026). Such public use of the site will provide a valuable opportunity for its future preservation. If properly interpreted, signed, maintained, and connected with other Sikh-period sites in the area – such as the Samadhi of Mahan Singh and the place of birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh – Sheranwala Bagh Baradari can become a centre of the Sikh heritage route of Gujranwala. The same strategy has been suggested by Rana et al. (2025) for Sheranwala Bagh as an important cultural centre for the thematic heritage-tourism route through the major sites of the city.



Fig. 3 Recently preserved and renovated Sheranwala Bagh Baradari (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 4 The eastern front elevation of Sheranwala Bagh Baradari (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)

Haveli Mahan Singh: The Birth Place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

The Haveli of Mahan Singh (birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh), situated in Purani Mandi, Gujranwala, is one of the most symbolic Sikh heritage places in the district due to its connection with the birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, founder of the Sikh Empire. It is named Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh because it is the birth place of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Ranjit Singh was born here on 13 November 1780 to Mahan Singh Sukerchakia, who was head of the Sukerchakia ruling family. Architecturally, the haveli depicts the housing style of high-class Sikh families with broad frontage, courtyards inside the structure, and walls covered with plaster paintings in the style known as kundan kari (Ahmad & Khilat, 2023).

Historically, the value of the haveli goes far beyond its connection with the birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Being part of the historic architecture of the walled city of Gujranwala, it is a reminder of the Sukerchakia era. Moreover, recent studies focusing on the non-Muslim heritage and secular heritage of Gujranwala have considered the Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh as one of the most important buildings from the Sikh period and highlighted its conservation requirements as well as importance for tourism based on culture and heritage (Rana et al., 2025).

Currently, there is a renovation and construction work going on at this monument, as we observed during our field visit in January 2026 and March 2026. Workers, scaffolding, and construction material can be seen at several structural locations of the site. This shows the focus on this monument, but renovation of such an important building requires the proper application of conservation practices so that no parts of this heritage can be lost in the process of conservation. Earlier literature has already highlighted issues related to structural deterioration, vandalism, encroachment, and the requirement of sensitized conservation of the haveli (Ahmad & Khilat, 2023). But the birthplace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh can be renovated in such a way that it may cause irreversible heritage damage (Abbas. Q, personal communication, March 18, 2026).

Considering the rich history behind it, the haveli holds a lot of promise for becoming a significant anchor for Sikh heritage tourism in Gujranwala because of its central location in the city and the close link it shares with the founder of the Sikh Empire. As suggested by Rana et al. (2025), a thematic Sikh heritage trail should be created which links the place of birth of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with other contemporary Sikh monuments.



Fig.5 A general view of Haveli Mahan Singh from top floor (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 6 A general view of Haveli Mahan Singh (ground floor) (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)

Gurdwara Damdama Sahib

Gurdwara Damdama Sahib was an institution of great significance for the Sikhs in Gujranwala. The word damdama means a holy place for rest and encampment. It refers to Baba Sahib Singh Bedi, a direct descendant of Guru Nanak Dev Ji who even crowned Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the year 1801 (Jatt, 2015). Gurdwara Damdama Sahib was formally inaugurated on 9 October 1928 on the day of a Gurpurab, under a committee that included Sardar Bahadur Sukha Singh, with his sons, Sardar Mangal Singh and Mahan Singh taking forward the work. According to Qaiser (1998), the completed structure of the gurdwara consisted of a large complex with many rooms and the Prakashasthan situated between the langar hall and other auxiliary rooms.

The closeness of the gurdwara to the Gujranwala Railway Station further increased its practical significance for Sikh travellers. Its proximity to Gujranwala Railway Station also made it significant for Sikh travellers who passed through the city via the Lahore-Rawalpindi railways line (Begum. M, personal communication, March 19, 2026). The importance of Damdama Sahib beyond being a pre-Partition gurdwara of Sikh Gujranwala is further evidenced from past literature, which recognizes the site among other major functioning gurdwaras of the district prior to Partition (Ali et al., 2021).

In terms of field observations, however, an entirely different history exists for the place after Partition. There have been immigrant settlements around the gurdwara complex since 1947,

followed by residential occupation through generations. Most seriously, however, there has been partial demolition of the gurdwara structure and the ruins thereof remain visible in the form of piles within the gurdwara complex. This can be considered an institutional failure in the form of partial demolition of the gurdwara without proper documentation on the part of ETPB (Ghulam. S, personal communication, March 8, 2026). In spite of all this, the remaining parts of the structure still enable one to understand the scale and organization of the building, including the relationship between the main halls, Prakashasthan, and other spaces. The destroyed parts of the complex, on the other hand, constitute a serious and irreversible loss of architectural structure and evidence. The continued presence of ruins, along with the lack of conservation effort at the time of the field survey, emphasize the fragility of the structure.

Thus, Damdama Sahib is an important example of the process of transforming Sikh religious heritage in the post-partition period, which includes a formerly significant religious travelers' complex that was occupied and partially destroyed. Its historical significance, as well as its urban location and architectural remains, suggest that the site deserves to be included in the conservation planning and a possible touristic Sikh heritage path in Gujranwala. Prior to doing so, however, it is necessary to document the site, assess its structure, conduct conservation efforts, and establish its current use and management.



Fig. 7 The crumbling Gurdwara Damdama Sahib (Photo: Madiha Abbas)

Gurdwara Rori Sahib, Eminabad

Gurdwara Rori Sahib is situated in Eminabad and is one of the most prominent surviving Sikh shrines in the district of Gujranwala. The term 'rori' means broken stones/pebbles and symbolizes the tradition according to which Guru Nanak Dev Ji slept and meditated on the bed of pebbles after the destruction of Saidpur by the army of Babar. According to the tradition, Guru Nanak was then captured and imprisoned here by the Mughal soldiers. The incident holds significance not only as per the traditions of Sikhs but also since the verses of Guru Nanak specifically condemned the brutality exercised against civilians during the invasion of Babar. The gurdwara was bestowed with nine marabbas of agricultural land by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and earned an annual revenue of Rs. 5,000 per annum. The gurdwara was burnt down on 15 August 1947 and has been rebuilt by the Government of Pakistan along with the construction of the present boundary wall (Qaiser, 1998).

Furthermore, the historical significance of Rori Sahib is reinforced from the research done on Sikh sacred space by Malhotra. From her analysis of archive data, she points out that there was an increase in the number of gurdwaras patronized by Sikh rulers through gifts of lands and revenues in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and she mentions Gurdwara Rori Sahib at Eminabad as one of such patronized gurdwaras. She further mentions that Maharaja Ranjit Singh made a large jagir of about 225 acres of land to the gurdwara (Malhotra, 2005). Thus, this makes Rori Sahib an example of the general trend of Sikh state patronage whereby sacred spaces associated with the Gurus were endowed and developed. The earlier research on the Sikh Gujranwala too has pointed out Rori Sahib as one of the important pre-Partition gurdwaras of the district and has stressed its sanctity due to its association with Guru Nanak's stay at Saidpur (Ali et al., 2021).

In terms of architecture, Gurdwara Rori Sahib is considered to be one of the most unusual Sikh temples in Pakistan. The main building of this temple is represented as a three-storied brick building with three chhatris and a prominent dome. The sarovar is placed in one part of the building. One of the most remarkable elements of the gurdwara is represented as ribbed white lotus dome, which is linked with the chamber dedicated to the bed of pebbles where Guru Nanak used to rest. Architectural design, decoration and symbolism of the building make it a unique object of history, beauty and devotion. The temple of Rori Sahib is the only fully functioning gurdwara in the whole district of Gujranwala. Pilgrimage teams from India visit this place regularly, according to some agreements, and the celebration of the annual Vaisakhi fair takes place there. Some religious ceremonies are conducted, and maintenance of the surroundings of the gurdwara is carried out (Zarar. A, personal communication, March 18, 2026). There are two gurdwaras in the town of Eminabad – Chakki Sahib and Khooi Bhai Lalo. They belong to the Rori Sahib gurdwara, which possesses their keys. The continued religious importance of Rori Sahib sets it apart from many of the other Sikh heritage sites in the area which have become off-limits, inactive, occupied or even in danger of being destroyed. The general context provided by Malhotra's study is important here as it makes clear that Sikh sacred sites had a much richer religious and social history, encompassing aspects such as worship, congregation, langar,

accommodation, grants and travel services, rather than just standing as isolated monuments. In this respect, Rori Sahib continues to retain more of its past religious and social importance than most Sikh sites in contemporary Gujranwala. For this reason, Rori Sahib is well suited to serve as the primary pilgrimage focal point of a larger Eminabad Sikh heritage route that can connect it to Gurdwara Chakki Sahib and Gurdwara Khooi Bhai Lalo.



Fig. 8 Principal Entrance Gateway (Front Façade), Gurdwara Rori Sahib (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 9 Main Shrine (Darbar Sahib) of Gurdwara Rori Sahib (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)

Gurdwara Chakki Sahib, Eminabad

Gurdwara Chakki Sahib is dedicated to the location where Guru Nanak Dev Ji was jailed at Saidpur and was made to grind corn in a chakki (a hand-driven millstone). As per the Janamsakhi tradition, the millstone kept spinning even as Guru Nanak chanted hymns and the story ended up making Guru Nanak and other captives free due to the discovery of this fact by Babur (Qaiser, 1998). Malhotra validates the same tradition as well by noting that Gurdwara Chakki Sahib located in Eminabad is the site where Guru Nanak was forced to grind corn and ultimately was freed along with many other prisoners. Thus, the site is not just a memorial monument but an important part of Sikh holy geography in relation to the travels of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and his experiences. In that respect, Malhotra's account about the creation of the Sikh sacred space is relevant because he discusses how the sites associated with the Gurus became places of congregation, remembrance, worship, and religion-based collective identity (Malhotra, 2005). The endowment of the gurdwara comprises fourteen acres of agriculture lands which yield revenue controlled by ETPB. Regarding architecture, the current structure is rather modest with a flat roof and murals of the meeting between Guru Nanak and Babur. But the gurdwara is locked by a lock that only the Gurdwara Rori Sahib, which is responsible for its maintenance and has keys to it, can open. Therefore, it cannot be functional alone (Kabir. M, personal communication, March 18, 2026).

Based on field observation, it appears that the building is in fairly good physical condition and the Nishan Sahib is being maintained despite the absence of any religious activity there. Thus, a significant difference can be made between preservation and functionality. In contrast to Rori Sahib that remains active as a worship place, Chakki Sahib is preserved solely as a holy structure while its religious functioning is contingent upon Rori Sahib. In terms of heritage and pilgrimage tourism, there is much that can be done for Chakki Sahib due to its relevance to an incident from the life of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and its closeness to Rori Sahib and Khooi Bhai Lalo. Instead of promoting the site as a single monument on its own, a tour circuit could be formed that takes into account all three holy places that have relevance to Guru Nanak Dev Ji. This will help restore the connection between sacred memory, pilgrimage, and place in terms of heritage and tourism.

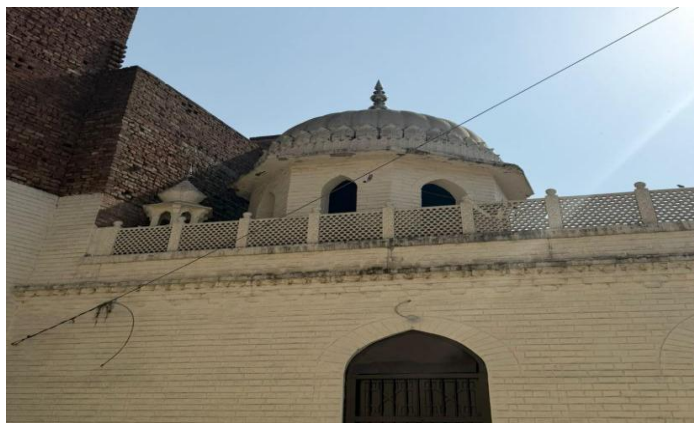


Fig. 10 Gurdwara Chakki Sahib (Photo: Madiha Abbas)

Gurdwara Khooi Bhai Lalo, Eminabad

Khooi Bhai Lalo Gurdwara is dedicated to Bhai Lalo's house and the small well called Khooi, where Bhai Lalo, a carpenter of Saidpur and an early follower of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, resided. It is claimed that Guru Nanak selected the humble abode of Bhai Lalo to reside in instead of Malik Bhago's residence where he received hospitality from Malik Bhago. The famous story where Guru Nanak pressed the bread of the two men and blood flowed from the bread of Malik Bhago whereas milk from the bread of Bhai Lalo took form and became symbolic of exploitation versus honest labour. During the times of Bhai Lalo, the residence of Bhai Lalo turned into a dharamsala of Sikhs and eventually into a gurdwara focusing on the Khooi that remains today (Qaiser, 1998).

The transformation of Bhai Lalo's house into a dharamsala is in line with the development of Sikh sacred space as described by Malhotra (2005). During the times of Guru Nanak and his successors, dharamsala served as places for congregational worship, kirtan, seva and religious community life, and local sangats sprang up around them. In this context, the connection between the place and the domestic space, the well, and the early Sikh community makes Khooi Bhai Lalo important not only in terms of being a memorial shrine but also as an illustration of how everyday spaces that were related to the wanderings of Guru Nanak became consecrated places of worship over time. The same applies to Gurdwara Khooi Bhai Lalo; it is locked and managed by Gurdwara Rori Sahib, just like Chakki Sahib. The key is kept at Rori Sahib. According to fieldwork results, the building is in good condition, the Nishan Sahib flag is present, and there is no function independent from Gurdwara Rori Sahib. All three Gurdwaras of Eminabad form a particular pattern whereby Rori Sahib stays active, while Chakki Sahib and Khooi Bhai Lalo exist as architectural monuments without any activity. As far as pilgrimage tourism is concerned, Khooi Bhai Lalo is unique in terms of the strong moral message it conveys. Because of its connection with Bhai Lalo, hard work, humility, and early teachings of Guru Nanak, the site has great interpretation value. In an Eminabad heritage route that includes all three sites – Rori Sahib, Chakki Sahib, and Gurudwara Sahib – all of which are associated with the presence of Guru Nanak in Saidpur (Shah & Kazi, 2012).

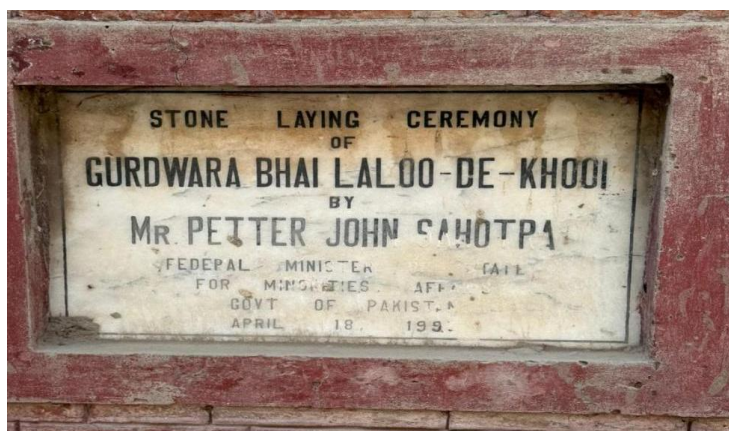


Fig. 11 The laying stone of Gurdwara Bhai Laloo de Khooi (Photo: Madiha Abbas)



Fig. 12 Bhai Laloo de Khooi (well) (Photo: Madiha Abbas)

Gurdwara Khara Sahib, Mattoo Bhaike (Beike Mutto), Nowshera Virkan

The gurdwara known as Khara Sahib in the village of Mattoo Bhaike, located close to Nowshera Virkan, symbolizes the legend about the visit of the Sixth Guru of Sikhs, Guru Hargobind Sahib, to this place during his journey to Kashmir circa 1620. In accordance with Sikh traditions, the Guru made an address to the residents of the area, urging them to follow the path of Guru Nanak and, in particular, to refrain from using tobacco. The resolute statement that was made on this occasion gave the shrine its name, Khara Sahib (Qaiser, 1998). Historical significance of the shrine in the Sikh architectural complex of Gujranwala is also supported by previous academic work that listed Khara Sahib as one of the important gurdwaras in the district prior to Partition (Ali et al., 2021).

The gurdwara stands out from others in its architecture. Its rectangular floor plan consists of four doorways that can be understood as an embodiment of the Sikh concept of equality and openness. Heritage significance of the shrine is provided by the nearly one hundred Gurmukhi plates with donors' names inscribed on the wall of the building. Many of them also bear devotional verses. They therefore represent an invaluable documentary source concerning the pre-1947 patronage, involvement and remembrance of Sikhs in local communities. The Gurdwara Khara Sahib, Mattoo Bhaike is undergoing renovation works. During the site visit workers were seen working on the site. Semi-structured interviews carried out with the construction workers reveal that the work is going on quite well and the gurdwara will become operational within two to three months' time

from the date of this fieldwork visit. Apart from Rori Sahib, which has already become operational, this is the only gurdwara in the Gujranwala District Heritage Inventory which is progressing towards becoming operational again. (Personal communication with Ahmad A., May 15, 2026). The current revival of Khara Sahib takes on additional importance when considered in light of the wider context of decline, abandonment and adaptive re-use of Sikh heritage sites in Pakistan. As illustrated throughout Amardeep Singh's documentation of Sikh heritage, the gurdwaras and related sites that have survived the years of decline have been significantly altered or destroyed since Partition (Singh, 2016). Khara Sahib thus demands that the continued conservation of the donor plaques and historic fabric be at the heart of its restoration. Should this restoration be handled carefully enough, Khara Sahib could serve as a prime example of an inactive Sikh holy place being brought back to life. The connection with Guru Hargobind Sahib, its unique architecture, its Gurmukhi inscriptions, and its nascent religious use also mean that it would fit well into a larger circuit of Sikhs sites within Gujranwala district.



Fig.13 Gurdwara Khara Sahib, under renovation and preservation (Photo: Madiha Abbas)

Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Gujranwala

The historical importance and architectural details of Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Gujranwala, have been reported earlier by Amardeep Singh in his book *Lost Heritage: The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan*. Singh writes about how the road to the gurdwara passes through some areas, which still maintain their old names like Mohalla Guru Nanak Pura and Gobind Garh Market. Singh states that Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha is known architecturally for having windows

shaped like palanquins along with the Gurmukhi script of Khanda and Ik Onkar made in cement at the top of the entrance door. Post Partition of 1947, the gurdwara was converted into a school. Singh mentions that the major prayer hall had seen some degradation like an opening in the roof whereas other halls inside the complex were being used for academic activities. Singh also writes about later unfinished construction on upper floors that appeared to have been added to provide extra space along with the brick foundation of the base of the platform, on which Nishan Sahib was installed. There is also a plaque inside the major hall that indicates the construction of the Sant Attar Singh Hall in 1927 (Singh, 2016).

Our observations made in January and March 2026 show that the state of the gurdwara has worsened significantly. During our two visits, the complex looked abandoned and in poor condition. Much of the roof of the hall has fallen down and has exposed the whole structure to the weather, thus speeding up the destruction process. The hall has become severely neglected, as there was a great deal of garbage collected in it. Additionally, the courtyard and verandas were being used as places where people could park their motorcycles used in nearby shops and a school adjacent to the complex, not as integral parts of the religious complex. Therefore, this wrong use of the place together with neglect is posing a serious threat to the remaining elements of the gurdwara complex. Documentation, assessment, cleaning and stabilization are needed to preserve the complex. The comparison of the documentation made by Singh with ours in 2026 proves how the complex has changed over the years.



Fig. 14 Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Historic Main Façade (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 15 Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Gujranwala, Deteriorated Interior and Collapsed Roof (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)



Fig. 16 Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Gujranwala, Courtyard Used for Motorcycle Parking (Photo: Muhammad Kashif Ali)

Chak Ram Das Gurdwara

Guru Chak Ram Das Gurdwara has been linked with the Fifth Guru of Sikhism Guru Arjan Dev Ji, who compiled the first version of Adi Granth and became the first Sikh Guru to suffer martyrdom under the Mughals in 1606. The local oral history reveals that Guru Arjan Dev Ji visited the village because of the devotion of his Sikh follower Bhai Prana. As per Qaiser (1998), there was a gurdwara built in the spot where the Guru spent some time and was popularly known among the locals as Guru Da Mahal. Qaiser (1998) also mentions that by the end of twentieth century, the shrine was neglected and required maintenance.

There were also historical endowments associated with the site. In Sikhism, the gurdwaras have been provided with forty ghumaons of revenue-free land. This type of land grant to gurdwaras in Sikhism is not uncommon. According to Malhotra (2005), Sikh rulers used to provide such grants known as dharmarth grants to maintain the worship, maintenance of the gurdwaras, langar, etc. The field study revealed that the gurdwara mentioned by Qaiser (1998) has entirely vanished. Only surviving remnants are those of the chaubara known locally as Guru Da Mahal. The fact that even as the endowed land survived, the shrine that marked its existence vanished is an excellent illustration of institutional neglect in the list of Sikh heritage sites of the Gujranwala district. Even as the endowed land survived and provided for its income, the material site representing that endowment did not survive. The demise of the gurdwara serves as an illustration of a more general pattern found in studies of the heritage landscape of Gujranwala after Partition (Ali et al., 2021). Here, the heritage value exists not only in the extant structures but also in documenting the original footprint, the endowment, memory, and extant Guru Da Mahal while any more information does not disappear. From the viewpoint of heritage tourism, Chak Ram Das cannot now serve as a normal tourist destination since the main structure that serves as a gurdwara is no longer there. In this way, its importance would be based on documentation, interpretation, signage, and possibly even archaeology of architectural records of the existing structures. However, as a component of a larger Sikh heritage trail in the countryside, the site can still speak about the connection of Guru Arjan Dev Ji to Gujranwala and what results from the neglect of minor places of worship.

The State's Role in the Preservation of Sikh Heritage in Gujranwala

Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) set up through Evacuee Trust Properties (Management and Disposal) Act, 1975 is the main governmental body that has been entrusted with the task of managing, maintaining, and administering evacuee trust properties including several Hindu and Sikh religious shrines in Pakistan. The statutory duties assigned to the board include maintaining proper records of evacuee trust property, preparing the budget each year, and managing such properties in conformity with the act and rules. As far as Gujranwala district is concerned, this duty is assigned to Sikh religious properties along with their endowments including agricultural lands of gurdwaras like Chakki Sahib and Rori Sahib.

As far as the fiscal strength of the ETPB is concerned, it seems that the institution has considerable institutional capacity. As per ETPB's own statistics, its annual income has grown by Rs. 925 million

in the financial year 2024–25, amounting to Rs. 5.65 billion from Rs. 4.72 billion in the previous year (ETPB, 2025). The point to be made here is that while there is no issue of financial viability, the point is that how this strength is translated into documentation, maintenance, conservation, and restoration of individual heritage sites.

The on-site evidence collected at Gujranwala clearly shows an extremely uneven picture. Whereas some of the prominent sites like Gurdwara Rori Sahib continue to function and receive maintenance, others are either locked, at risk of structural damage, converted for another purpose or disappeared altogether. The stark discrepancy between the profitable trust properties and the deteriorated state of several connected religious buildings brings up the issue of distribution of funds dedicated to the conservation. For instance, agricultural land which belongs to the shrine Gurdwara Chakki Sahib is still part of the historical endowment, while the gurdwara itself does not work and is only accessible under the administration of Rori Sahib. The current research failed to find any open financial accounting of expenditures on conservation of Gujranwala trust properties. Another problem relates to the role and participation of institutions in heritage management. The ETPB functions together with the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC), which takes care of the advice for maintenance, preservation, and restoration of gurdwaras as well as arranging Sikh rituals and pilgrimages. However, there have been problems with minority representation at the ETPB in parliamentary debates. In 2019, a private member's bill was submitted by Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani to alter the membership in the Board. This bill was rejected by the National Assembly Standing Committee on Religious Affairs due to inconsistency of the provisions with Articles 25 and 27 of the Constitution (Dawn, 2019). After that, Vankwani appealed against the rejection of the bill. Issues of representation of minorities were also discussed lately. Thus, in December 2025, the Parliamentary Committee on Minority Caucus suggested the appointment of a chairperson from a minority community to increase minority representation in administration of religious and trust properties (Dawn, 2025). It can be concluded that issues related to representation in the structure of institutions responsible for heritage management have been discussed in policy debates. The third problem is the disparity between the high profile pilgrimage sites and lower profile rural or semi-urban gurdwaras. There is a difference between functional and non-functional gurdwaras made in ETPB's listing itself. The institutional focus of ETPB is on major pilgrimage centers and places to accommodate visiting yatraes, which is understandable from the point of view of religious administration and international pilgrimages. However, the case of Gujranwala shows that smaller sites with low numbers of visitors tend to be ignored in the matter of conservation. Places like Chak Ram Das, Panjvin Patshahi and other rural gurdwaras have a historical importance though they lack diplomatic significance and volume of visits of the other gurdwaras.

Therefore, the problem of preservation in Gujranwala is not just a problem of institution, but rather of priorities, transparency, documentation, and actual implementation at each site level. ETPB has both a statutory mandate and sufficient funds and infrastructure, and PSGPC is a way for Sikhs to participate in religious administration. The most significant gap in the field of conservation that this study has highlighted is the need for utilizing the capabilities of these institutions for the conservation of not only well-known pilgrimage sites but also those of lesser-

known rural sites. The creation of a district-level conservation policy, along with public disclosure of revenue and expenditure details, would be an important step toward the better conservation of Sikh heritage sites in Gujranwala.

Recommendations

The results of this study show that the preservation of Sikh heritage in Gujranwala demands a well-coordinated approach involving documentation, protection, conservation, institutional changes, community involvement, and well-planned heritage tourism. This issue cannot be addressed by focusing merely on the deterioration of particular monuments; rather, what is required is a framework at the level of district where such sites can be documented, prioritized, conserved, interpreted, and integrated within the overall context of Punjab.

Firstly, an inventory of Sikh heritage sites in Gujranwala district needs to be prepared collaboratively by the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), the Punjab Department of Archaeology, and respective local administrations. This inventory must document the exact location, ownership, historical significance, current function, state of conservation, endowments, encroachments, and conservation needs of all gurdwaras, samadhies, havelis, and other sites related to the Sikh period. Scholarly documentation, documentation by various Sikh diasporic organizations, and work done by independent heritage organizations provide valuable information but remains scattered and should be incorporated into an official and periodic database. Second, legal protection should be provided for sites of historical significance which are currently not within any heritage protection scheme. For instance, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Haveli, Samadhi of Mahan Singh, Gurdwara Damdama Sahib, and many others can be assessed for the need for protection as per the provincial and federal heritage laws. In addition, historically valuable sites could be assessed for incorporation into national heritage schemes, and at times, for potential international recognition. Nevertheless, legal protection should come with conservation plans and responsible institutions together with monitoring.

Third, there should be increased transparency in the way the revenue derived from evacuee trust properties is managed. In cases where agricultural land, buildings and other forms of endowments are traditionally associated with particular Sikh religious sites, there should be information on the record about how much revenue is earned and how much is allocated towards the preservation of the site. This will ensure accountability in the organization and can also increase confidence amongst the Sikh diaspora organizations and prospective heritage partners.

Fourth, the involvement of Sikhs in the management of Sikh religious heritage needs to be strengthened. The institution of Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee offers an existing institutional framework, yet the ongoing discussions regarding the representation of minorities in the ETPB demonstrate that the problem has not been solved yet (Dawn, 2019; Dawn, 2025). The involvement of experts in the field of Sikh heritage, religion, conservation, and communities would make the process more legitimate and fruitful.

Finally, the choice of priorities for conservation cannot be made only on the basis of the current number of visitors or visibility of the place for the international community. It is quite natural that

pilgrimage centers attract more attention of administrations, while rural or semi-urban monuments are no less valuable from the point of view of their historical value. Gurdwara Chak Ram Das, Khara Sahib, and other less famous monuments need different approaches to the protection of Sikh heritage, from urgent measures and documentation to restoration and revival.

Sixth, heritage tourism must be promoted only when conservation is adequately ensured. Gujranwala has enough number and variety of Sikh heritage sites to develop inter-connected heritage/pilgrimage trails. These can be linked in the form of an urban trail linking Haveli of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sheranwala Bagh Baradari, Samadhi of Mahan Singh, Gurdwara Damdama Sahib, and other Sikh era monuments. There is also the potential for an Eminabad trail that includes Gurdwara Rori Sahib, Chakki Sahib, and Khooi Bhai Lalo. Rural heritage sites related to Guru Hargobind Sahib and Guru Arjan Dev Ji can form the third trail. All these trails need to have interpretive signages, local guides, multilingual information, digital maps, visitors' facilities, and historic accounts rather than treating the monuments as tourist spots only. The importance of such thematic trails of Sikh heritage in Gujranwala has also been stressed in recent studies (Rana et al., 2025). Finally, there is a need to associate conservation with public education and participation of locals. The survival of these sites does not depend only on institutions at the state level or foreign Sikh tourists but also depends upon the locals who inhabit the area surrounding these historical places. There could be many ways of making people aware that these are not foreign monuments but monuments of history that belong to Punjab as well.

Conclusion

The city of Gujranwala holds a unique position within the historical geography of the Sikhs. This city was the political headquarters of the Sukerchakia Misl, the birthplace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the home of many important Sikhs of the military, and the district having the sites that were sacred for several Sikh Gurus. Nevertheless, the field data collected during the research show the great disparity between the historical significance of the heritage and its current state. The 12 sites studied by the researcher are in completely diverse states of survival. The Haveli of Mahan Singh is being restored, Sheranwala Bagh Baradari is in fairly good condition and still accessible to the public, Gurdwara Rori Sahib still operates as a site of worship and pilgrimage, and Khara Sahib is in the process of becoming once again a religious site. However, Gurdwara Damdama Sahib had been occupied and partly destroyed, the Samadhi of Mahan Singh has become structurally unstable, Gurdwara Panjvin Patshahi is getting closer to falling apart, and the main building of Chak Ram Das has already been lost. These examples show how the Sikh heritage of Gujranwala cannot be reduced to being either "preserved" or "neglected". Instead, this heritage is on a spectrum of being used religiously and/or conserved all the way to neglect, adaptation, destruction, and even disappearance.

These monuments are important not just to the Sikhs but to the entire Punjab because they are part of its historical/cultural landscape and reflect its history of religious diversity, politics, architecture, migration, and social change. In this regard, their conservation should not be seen just as the protection of minority religion heritage but also as the preservation of Pakistani national landscape. On the other hand, there is considerable tourism potential in Gujranwala in

terms of Sikh heritage and pilgrimage tourism. The combination of royal, religious, architectural, and Guru heritage can provide the basis for creating an interesting heritage trail connecting Gujranwala, Eminabad, and rural sacred sites. Nonetheless, tourism has to come after conservation rather than replace it. Sikh heritage of Gujranwala will, thus, be determined by whether or not such capacity is translated into conservation of the sites, management of these sites, participatory decision making, and sustainable tourism planning. With such measures put in place systematically, the monuments that survive in Gujranwala will cease being lone remnants of the past to become a protected part of a common cultural heritage and a significant part of Pakistan's heritage tourism circuit.

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