



The Kamranga Mosque: Architectural Synthesis and Heritage Significance in Colonial Dhaka - Review

Sazzadur Rasheed^{1*}, Farhana Nazneen², Mohammad Niamul Huda³

Abstract

The colonial phase (1757-1947) of the Indian subcontinent saw a blend of various cultural and philosophical influences on art and architecture, prominently shaped by the Portuguese, Dutch, English, British, French, and Danish. During the British Raj (1858-1947), large-scale edifices for administrative, commercial, religious, and secular purposes were constructed, profoundly impacting the architectural landscape. Bangladesh, then part of Bengal, became adorned with numerous architectural buildings reflecting these influences. Dhaka, a major trade hub, emerged as a cultural melting pot, integrating local contributions and colonial architectural styles. This study focuses on the "Kamranga" mosque in Zindabazar, Old Dhaka, built by affluent merchant Golam Rasul Chowdhury around 1895 AD. The mosque's unique features exemplify the assimilation of colonial architectural philosophies. Through precise documentation, construction analysis, comparative analogical study, and relevant case studies, this review highlights the stylistic synthesis of the Kamranga mosque, emphasizing its blend of Moorish and Mughal styles, and proposes heritage management plans to preserve similar structures.

Keywords: Colonial architecture, Kamranga Mosque, Historicism, Dhaka heritage, Muqarnas

Introduction

The colonial period of the Indian subcontinent (1757-1947) was a dynamic era marked by the convergence of diverse cultural and architectural influences brought by various European powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Danish (Mowla & Reza, 2000; Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011). This period saw a significant transformation in architectural styles, reflecting the interplay between European and indigenous designs. The British Raj, in particular, spurred the construction of numerous administrative, commercial, religious, and secular edifices, creating a rich tapestry of architectural heritage in the region (Islam, 1997; Khan, 2015).

As a part of British India, present-day Bangladesh, then a part of Bengal, became a prominent center of architectural innovation and cross-cultural exchange. Dhaka, a key trading hub, emerged as a melting pot of architectural styles, influenced by both European colonists and local traditions (Wikimedia Commons, 2015). This period witnessed the development of unique architectural forms that blended European and local elements, leading to a distinctive colonial architectural identity in Bangladesh (Haque, 1998). development of unique architectural forms that blended European and local elements, leading to a distinctive colonial architectural identity in Bangladesh (Haque, 1998). One notable example of this synthesis is the Kamranga Mosque, also known as the "Star Fruit" mosque, located in the Zindabazar area of Dhaka. Constructed around the turn of the 20th century by Golam Rasul Chowdhury, a wealthy merchant and descendant of a Mughal administrative officer, the mosque stands as a remarkable testament to the colonial

Significance | Kamranga Mosque's significance lies in its unique colonial architecture and Neo-Moorish style, marking a rare blend in Bangladeshi mosque history.

*Correspondence. Sazzadur Rasheed, Department of Architecture, Primeasia University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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Author Affiliation.

¹ Department of Architecture, Primeasia University, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

² Department of Architecture, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

³ Department of Archaeology, Comilla University, Cumilla, Bangladesh.

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architectural experimentation of the time (Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011). Unlike other contemporary structures, Kamranga Mosque features a unique blend of architectural styles, prominently showcasing Neo-Moorish influences that are rare in Bangladeshi mosque architecture (Gonzalo & Alkadi, 2018).

Architecturally, the Kamranga Mosque is characterized by its single dome and minimalistic ornamentation, which deviates from traditional Mughal and Sultani styles (Carrillo, 2012). The mosque's dome, with its distinctive grooved design reminiscent of a star fruit, represents an innovative approach to dome construction during the colonial period (Kaufmann, Giese, & Keller, 2016). This architectural choice reflects a broader trend of Historicism or Revival style, where historical architectural elements were reinterpreted and adapted to new contexts (Das, 2014; Gyetvai-Balogh, 2007).

The mosque's design integrates features of Neo-Moorish architecture, a style that emerged from the European fascination with Moorish designs (Ahmed, 2019). This is evident in the mosque's dome, which combines braced and scalloped elements, creating a unique aesthetic that sets it apart from other colonial-era structures. The integration of Muqarnas, an ornamental architectural element, further highlights the mosque's connection to Islamic architectural traditions, while also embracing the stylistic experimentation of the colonial era (Imamuddin & Khan, 1999).

Despite its historical and architectural significance, the Kamranga Mosque was unfortunately demolished in mid-2022 to make way for new commercial development (Khan, 2015). This loss underscores the urgent need for effective heritage management strategies to preserve and protect architectural landmarks of historical and cultural importance (Ahmed, 2019). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive architectural description of the Kamranga Mosque, highlighting its significance in the evolution of mosque architecture in Bangladesh and proposing strategies for the preservation of similar heritage structures in the future (Imamuddin & Asrker, 1985; Haque, 1998). By analyzing the architectural features and historical context of the Kamranga Mosque, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of colonial architectural heritage in Bangladesh and offer insights into the broader trends of architectural adaptation and preservation (Ahmed, 2019; Das, 2014).

Materials and Methods

To comprehensively analyze the architectural and historical significance of the Kamranga Mosque, a multi-faceted research methodology was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to document and evaluate the mosque's unique attributes. The study utilized several methodologies. Architectural features of the mosque were meticulously documented using a combination of digital and mechanical tools,

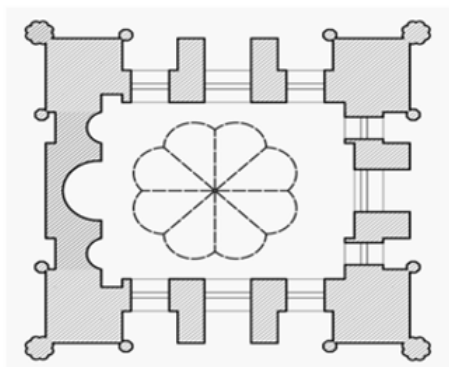
including high-resolution photography, 3D laser scanning, and traditional manual measurements (Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011; Mowla & Reza, 2000) as shown in table 1. This approach captured detailed dimensions, structural elements, and ornamentation, covering aspects such as the mosque's façade, dome, mihrabs, and interior layout (Gonzalo & Alkadi, 2018).

In addition, an in-depth analysis of the construction techniques and materials used in the mosque was conducted. This involved reviewing historical records, architectural plans (where available), and interviewing local historians and builders (Rahman, 2003; Imamuddin & Asrker, 1985). These sources provided insights into the ancient and modern construction processes, including material usage and architectural style integration (Ahmed, 2019). A comparative stylistic analysis examined the mosque's architectural style relative to contemporary styles of the time, involving a review of literature on colonial and Mughal architectural styles and comparisons with similar buildings from the same period (Das, 2014; Haque, 1998). This analysis identified influences and stylistic transitions (Kaufmann, Giese, & Keller, 2016) as shown in Figure 1(A-D) Figure 2 (A-B).

Relevant case studies of similar heritage buildings were reviewed to develop effective heritage management strategies. This included analyzing preservation practices of comparable structures and evaluating their success in maintaining historical integrity (Gyetvai-Balogh, 2007; Madjanovic, 2020). Such case studies informed practical and economically viable strategies for preserving architectural monuments like the Kamranga Mosque (Fundación Pública Andaluza El legado andalusí, 2016). The historical context of the mosque's construction was explored through interviews with descendants of the builder, Golam Rasul Chowdhury, and a review of family publications and historical documents (Islam, 1997). This provided insights into the socio-economic and political influences that shaped the mosque's design and its significance to the Chowdhury family and the local community (Imamuddin & Khan, 1999) as shown in Figure 3, Figure 4. The mosque's architectural style was evaluated through a detailed analysis of its design features, including Neo-Moorish elements and the unique dome structure (Carrillo, 2012). The study examined the stylistic influences of the time, such as Moorish Revival and Mughal architecture, to understand how these styles were integrated into the mosque's design, supported by visual documentation and architectural theory (Ahmed, 2019). Additionally, the research included an examination of the muqarnas (stalactite work) and dome construction, studying geometric patterns and structural techniques and comparing them with historical examples of muqarnas in Islamic architecture (Khan, 2015). This analysis provided insights into the innovative aspects of

Table 1. Architectural Theories and Styles by Period and Region

	Theory at the beginning of the 20 th century (German)	Theory in the middle of the 20 th century (French-English)		Theory at the end of the 20 th century (Austrian)
Until 1750	Baroque	Baroque		Baroque
From 1750 to 1800	(Neo-) Classicism (early, flowering)	Romantic Classicism	Active Romanticism	Naïve Historicism
From 1780 to 1830	(Landscape, gardening, Neo-Greek, Greek revival)	Classicizing Romanticism		Pure-in-style Historicism
From 1770 to 1840	Romanticism (Neo-Romanesque, Neo-Gothic, Gothic Revival)	Romanesque Romanticism Gothicizing Romanticism		
From 1840 to 1890	Eclecticism (Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Baroque)	Historicism	Passive Rom	Style-mixing Historicism
From 1890 to 1910	Art-Nouveau/ Secession (European Art Nouveau Movement)	Turn of the 20 th Century		Turn of the 20 th Century
From 1910	(International) Modern (twentieth-century style) (today's style)	Pre-Modern		Pre-Modern



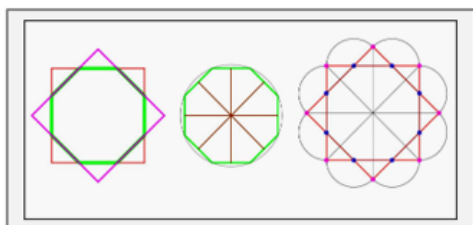
A



B



C



D

Figure 1. A) ground Plan (kamranga Mosque), B) North Elevation, C) West Elevation, D) Square transformation to circle



Figure 2. A) Dome Interior, B) Exterior of Dome, C) North View



Figure 3. A) Before, B) Top View of Dome and C) Zindabahr Lane

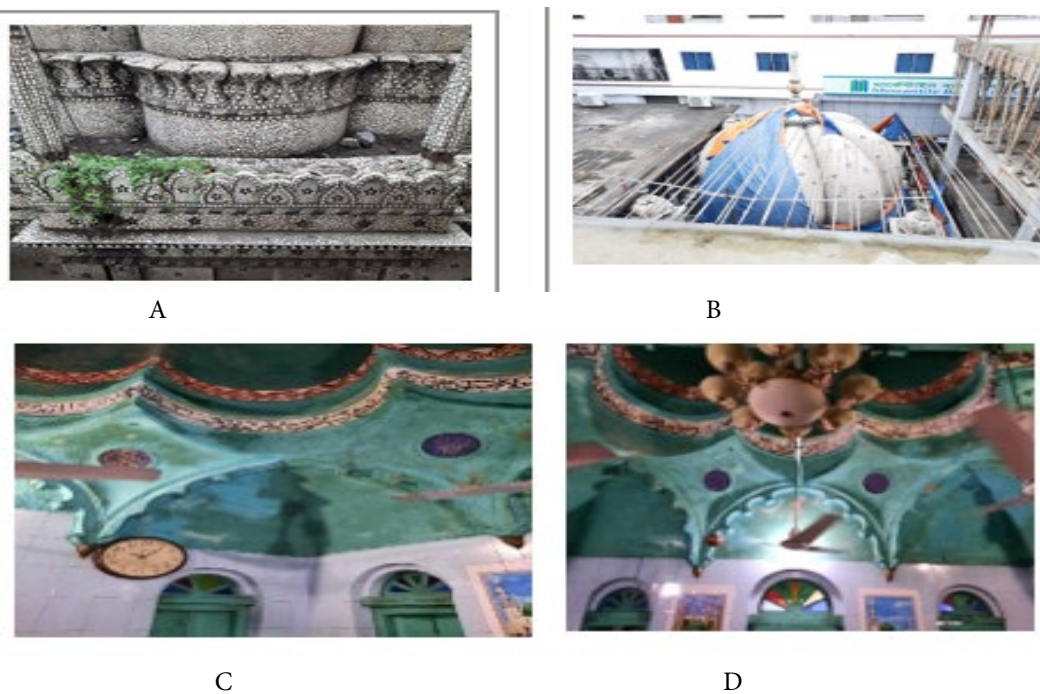
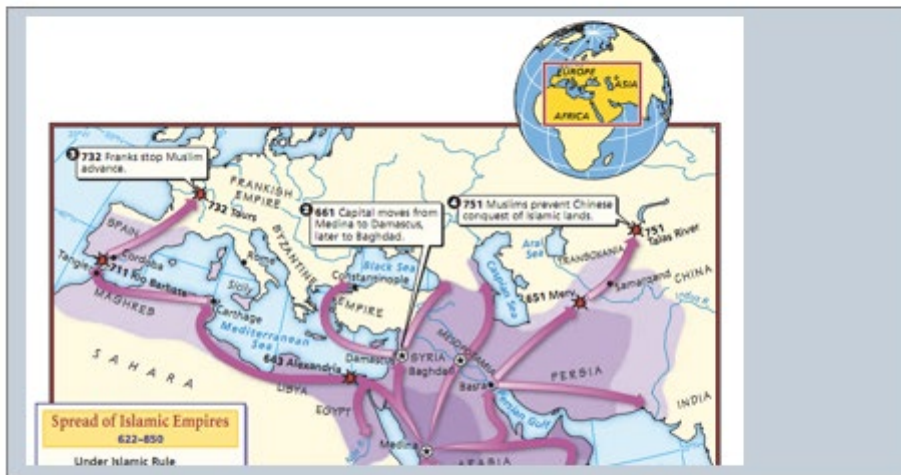
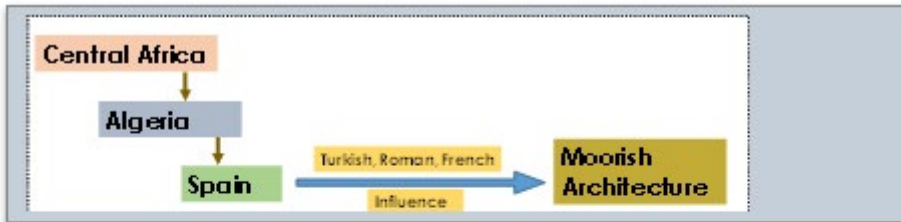


Figure 4. A) Ornamented dome drum and B) Mosque extension work, C) Muqarnas pendentive



A

B



C

Figure 5. A-B) Thematic diagram of evolution of Islamic Architecture style, B) Moorish architectural style originates with Almoravids¹ in Spain in 10th century. In 19th century, the French colonized Algeria and AL-Andalusia (Spain). The French and British¹ taken architectural inspiration from a well-known place, i.e., Spain which is in main European landscape and culturally in all these places, it has its roots in classical Greek-Roman origin. This idealistic movement of blending past architectural style with the new is called ‘Historicism’¹ or ‘Revival style’ and the British and the French spread this new architectural idea in their own colonies.

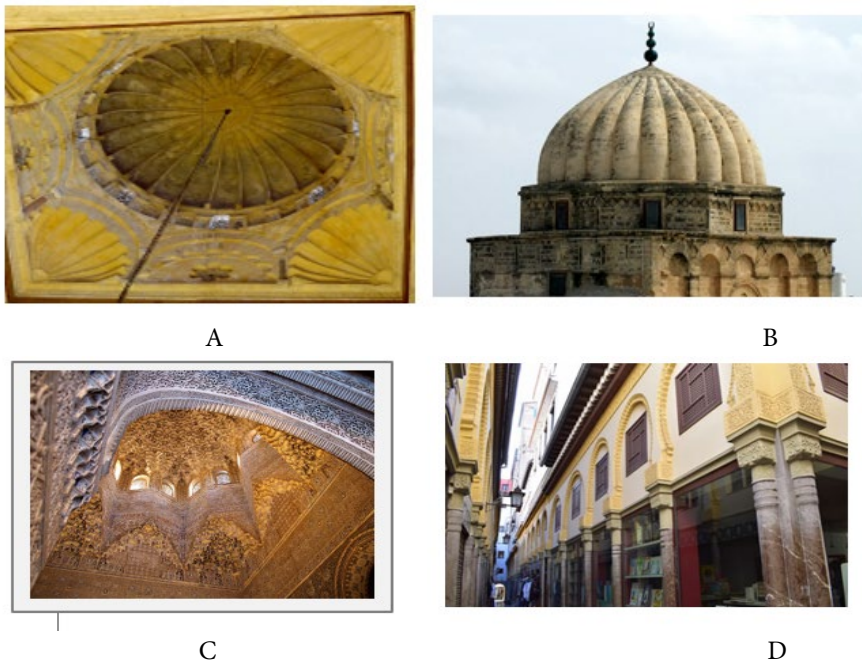
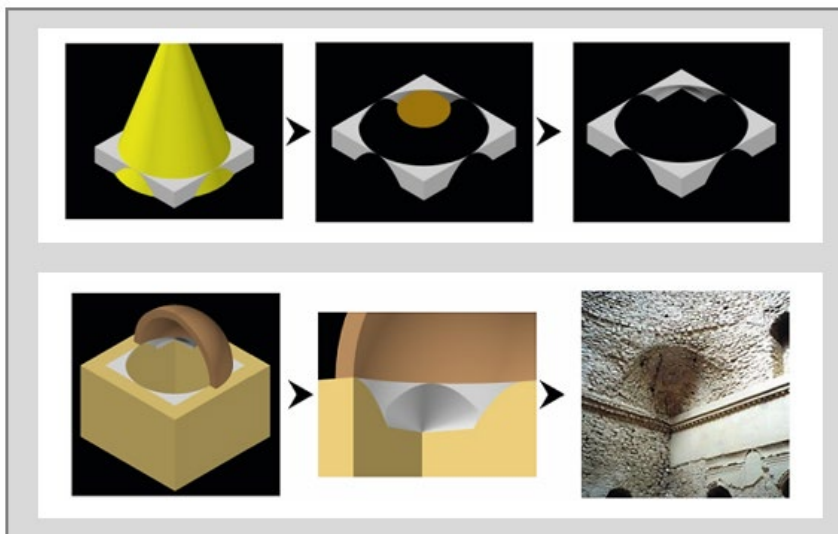
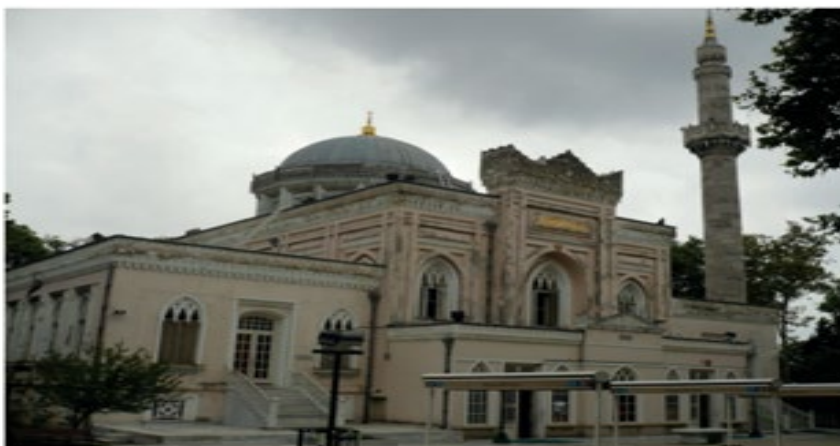


Figure 6. A) Alcaiceria of Granada, B) Alcaiceria of Granada, C) Alcaiceria of Granada, D) Star-shaped dome in the Hall of the Abencerrajes



A



B

Figure 7. A) The conical vault squinch, B) Mosque Yıldız Camisi/ Hamidiye Camisi

the Kamranga Mosque's dome design (Haque, 1998) as shown in Figure 5, Figure 6.

By employing these methodologies, the study aimed to create a comprehensive documentation of the Kamranga Mosque's architectural and historical significance, offering valuable insights into its role in the evolution of mosque architecture in Bangladesh and proposing strategies for future heritage preservation (Das, 2014; Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011).

Results

The Kamranga Mosque, an exemplary artifact of colonial architecture in Bangladesh, provides a distinctive study of architectural evolution and stylistic synthesis during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Built around 1895 by Golam Rasul Chowdhury, a prominent merchant from the Zindabazar area of Dhaka, the mosque represents a unique fusion of architectural influences and styles (Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011).

The mosque's architectural form is characterized by its single-dome structure and minimalistic exterior. The building follows a square plan, with a central dome that stands out due to its grooved design reminiscent of the star fruit, which is unique among Bangladeshi mosques (Mowla & Reza, 2000). The exterior features a 24-foot square base with arched doorways on three sides and a single entrance each on the north and south. The dome, covering the prayer chamber, measures approximately 11 feet in diameter and 7 feet in height, resting on a grooved drum. This design reflects a blend of braced and scallop or umbrella dome styles, indicative of the Neo-Moorish influence observed in colonial-era architecture (Gonzalo & Alkadi, 2018), as shown in Figure 7 (A, B). Internally, the mosque houses a prayer chamber measuring 28 feet 6 inches square, with three semicircular mihrabs on the qibla wall. The central mihrab is more prominent, flanked by two smaller ones, all adorned with multi-cusped pointed arches (Rahman, 2003). The dome's interior is particularly notable for its use of triangular brick arrangements and Arabic calligraphy inscribed on the pendentive borders, showcasing the integration of Moorish and Islamic decorative elements (Carrillo, 2012).

The Kamranga Mosque's dome, an advanced construction feature, combines the traditional grooved design with modern techniques to support a larger span while maintaining a lighter structure. This innovation is particularly significant as it suggests a sophisticated understanding of dome construction, balancing structural stability with aesthetic appeal (Kaufmann, Giese, & Keller, 2016).

Stylistically, the mosque exemplifies a blend of Moorish revival and late Mughal influences. The façade's ornamental details and the dome's design echo the Historicism trend of the 19th century, which saw a revival of historical styles and techniques (Das, 2014). The integration of Moorish elements, such as intricate arches and decorative patterns, with traditional Mughal features underscores

the mosque's role as a transitional piece in architectural history (Haque, 1998).

The mosque's architectural significance extends beyond its immediate stylistic attributes. It reflects a broader trend of cultural and architectural assimilation during the colonial period, where local traditions merged with European and Moorish influences (Imamuddin & Khan, 1999). This synthesis illustrates the dynamic nature of architectural development in colonial Bengal, driven by both local artisans and colonial architects (Gyetvai-Balogh, 2007).

The demolition of Kamranga Mosque in 2022 represents a significant loss to Bangladesh's architectural heritage. As the only comprehensive scholarly documentation of its unique features, this paper underscores the importance of preserving such structures and proposes heritage management strategies to safeguard similar historical monuments in the future (Ahmed, 2019). The study highlights the need for effective conservation practices that respect both the historical and cultural significance of colonial-era buildings (Fundación Pública Andaluza El legado andalusí, 2016).

Discussion

Kamranga Mosque stands as a remarkable example of colonial architecture in Dhaka, blending elements of Mughal and Neo-Moorish styles in a unique way. Constructed by Golam Rasul Chowdhury in the late 19th century, this mosque represents a distinctive fusion of architectural traditions that reflect the cultural and historical context of its time (Ahmad Kamaruddin, 2011; Rahman, 2003).

The mosque's architectural features exhibit a synthesis of styles that were prevalent during the colonial era. The use of the Neo-Moorish style, particularly evident in the design of the dome, is a testament to the influence of European architectural philosophies in colonial Bangladesh. The grooved dome, resembling a star fruit, is not merely ornamental but serves a functional purpose, reducing lateral wind forces and providing a taller, lighter structure compared to traditional domes. This approach aligns with the Historicism movement, which sought to blend past architectural styles with contemporary needs (Carrillo, 2012; Gyetvai-Balogh, 2007; Madjanovic, 2020).

Kamranga Mosque's exterior, with its simple rectangular panels and minimal ornamentation, contrasts sharply with the elaborate Mughal architectural tradition. However, the incorporation of Neo-Moorish elements, such as the scalloped or umbrella dome, highlights a conscious effort to merge different architectural influences (Das, 2014; Kaufmann, Giese, & Keller, 2016; Mowla, 2016). This fusion reflects the broader colonial architectural trends in Bengal, where European styles were adapted and integrated with local traditions (Ahmed, 2019; Khan, 2015).

The interior of the mosque, featuring three semicircular mihrabs and a richly decorated dome, further illustrates this blend. The use

of Muqarnas in the dome's design, inspired by Islamic architectural traditions, complements the Neo-Moorish exterior (Carrillo, 2012; Gonzalo & Alkadi, 2018). This integration of diverse stylistic elements underscores the mosque's role as a transitional piece in the evolution of architectural styles in colonial Bengal (Mowla & Reza, 2000; Fundación Pública Andaluza El legado andalusí, 2016).

Despite its historical and architectural significance, the Kamranga Mosque's complete demolition in 2022 underscores the pressing need for effective heritage management strategies. The loss of such a unique structure highlights the challenges of preserving historical architecture amidst rapid urban development (Haque, 1998; Islam, 1997; Khan, 2015). The proposed heritage management strategies aim to address these challenges by offering guidelines for the conservation of similar structures in the future (Ahmed, 2019; Imamuddin & Asrker, 1985; Mowla, 2016).

Conclusion

The Kamranga Mosque, with its unique Neo-Moorish and colonial architectural features, stands as a rare example of historical blending in Bangladeshi mosque architecture. Its distinctive grooved dome and minimalistic Mughal elements highlight the influence of both Moorish revival and local styles during the late 19th to early 20th century. Despite its demolition in 2022, the mosque's design offers invaluable insights into the fusion of historical architectural styles and cultural exchanges of the colonial period. This paper underscores the importance of documenting such heritage structures and advocates for the development of effective preservation strategies to safeguard future architectural monuments. By reflecting on the Kamranga Mosque's legacy, we emphasize the need for robust heritage management practices to protect and celebrate historical architecture.

Author contributions

S.R. conceptualized the project, developed the methodology, conducted a formal analysis, and drafted the original writing. F.N. contributed to the methodology, conducted investigations, provided resources, and visualized the data. M.N.H. contributed to the reviewing and editing of the writing.

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Competing financial interests

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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