



Mosque architecture of Amborkhana Dargah: An exemplification of potential conservation practice in Sylhet, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Amborkhana Dargah mosque in Sylhet, Bangladesh is a historic architectural monument which reflects the glorious past of Islam through its beautiful architectural quality. This volume examines the architectural aspects of the mosque, exploring its history in a chronological framework and charting its development to the present with contemporary drawings and photographs by British troops. The architectural aspects of the mosque, its section and leveling are being investigated and also the description is made about the section of the mosque. In this, the civilization and the foliage density around the dargah were observed. Contemporary photography documents the current state of the mosque and its continued religious and cultural significance. The research combines history and context with today's heritage challenges and may serve as a paradigm to help lead the way to heritage awareness and saving the architectural character of the traditional urban village of Sylhet. This study provides an evidence-based perspective, by paying equal attention to sustainable heritage management and the importance of history and community in a city that is rapidly urbanized.

Keywords: Amborkhana Dargah; Mosque Architecture; Conservation Practice; Sylhet Heritage; Historical Transformation

1. Introduction

The Amborkhana Dargah mosque in Sylhet, Bangladesh, is a historically and culturally significant Islamic edifice intricately connected to the region's spiritual and architectural legacy. Sylhet, once referred to as Srihatta, has served as a prosperous hub for trade and culture throughout antiquity. The arrival of Hazrat Shah Jalal (R.A) in 1303 AD signified a crucial juncture in the Islamic history of the region, as he orchestrated the capture of Sylhet and established it as a nucleus for the dissemination of Islam throughout Bengal and beyond [3,4]. The dargah and mosque complex of Shah Jalal, featuring the Amborkhana Dargah mosque, functions as a central hub for religious devotion, pilgrimage, and cultural identity, encapsulating centuries of spiritual heritage and communal existence [5,6].

The historical timeline of the mosque is intertwined with the extensive Islamic conquest and settlement in Sylhet, where Sufi saints such as Shah Jalal significantly contributed to religious dissemination and societal change. The Amborkhana Dargah mosque was initially erected in the early 15th century during the reign of Sultan Abu Mujafar Yusuf Shah of Bengal and subsequently reconstructed in the 18th century under Faujdar Bahram Khan, illustrating the patronage of successive Muslim rulers and local elites [5]. The mosque complex serves as both a religious venue and a repository of Sylhet's historical narratives, encompassing the amalgamation of local traditions with Islamic architectural and cultural activities.

The Amborkhana Dargah mosque shows the architectural amalgamation of Sultanate and Mughal styles, featuring stone masonry, domes and courtyards designed for communal worship and religious rites. The mosque's physical

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arrangement, comprising its prayer hall, courtyard, ablution facilities and adjacent structures, demonstrates modifications to climatic, social and religious requirements over the ages. Historical photos and paintings, notably those created by British soldiers, chronicle the mosque's physical evolution as well as the evolving green density and land use patterns of the surrounding terrain. These records offer significant insights on the mosque's transformation and the urban environment of Sylhet [5].

The Amborkhana Dargah mosque, however, remains at risk for perishing despite its cultural significance. Rapid urban development, environmental damage and poor maintenance have undermined the mosque's structural stability and the conservation of its historical material. Changes in land use and green cover of vicinity of mosque has changed the traditional setting of the mosque and affects the physical environment as well as the spiritual environment of the site. The absence of any structured conservation policy which is buttressed by community participation compounds the problem of how we can conserve this relic for posterity.

2. Aims and Objectives

This intensive research aims to thoroughly document and assess the noteworthy architectural and historic importance of the Amborkhana Dargah mosque in Sylhet. A comprehensive conservation approach will be recommended to preserve its cultural significance sustainably. The undertaking emphasizes developing a detailed chronicle by exploring archival materials from its inception. An architectural evaluation was performed to dissect structural and stylistic evolutions over time. Additionally, surrounding environmental elements such as plant density and land use near the mosque were examined. The investigation also assessed the mosque's current condition to identify preservation challenges. Ultimately, the study strives to formulate balanced conservation plans that respect the mosque's past while accommodating modern community needs and urban progression in a mutually beneficial way.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a methodology that comprehensively integrates archival research, architectural analysis, environmental assessment, and fieldwork documentation to examine the Amborkhana Dargah mosque. Initially, archival research involved scrutinizing historical records, British-era paintings, photographs, and maps from national archives and internet sources to create a chronological narrative of the mosque's construction and architectural development. Subsequently, thorough on-site surveys recorded the mosque's modern architectural features and current religious practices through measurements, sectional drawings, and photographic documentation. Current data were evaluated with historical documents to discern alterations in the mosque's structure over time. The environmental assessment analyzed satellite imagery and geographic data to investigate modifications in green space density and land use patterns around the mosque, highlighting the impact of urbanization on its surroundings. Moreover, structural evaluations and consultations with local stakeholders yielded insights into preservation challenges and management strategies. The study presents informed and sustainable preservation alternatives by integrating interdisciplinary knowledge, ensuring the mosque's architectural integrity, cultural relevance, and the needs of the local population align with the evolving urban landscape of Sylhet.

4. Mosque Conservation Principles and Regulatory Frameworks: International Guidelines and Regional Practices

The conservation of mosques is governed by internationally acknowledged norms and region-specific frameworks designed to maintain the architectural, cultural, and spiritual integrity of these sacred edifices. The Venice Charter (1964), established by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), is a seminal document that underscores the importance of preserving the authenticity of historic monuments through the conservation of original materials, design, and craftsmanship and stipulates that restoration efforts must be preceded by comprehensive research and documentation [31]. Conservation standards for mosques often encompass minimal interference, scientific inquiry, comprehensive documenting of all conservation efforts, and the application of effective and suitable measures to guarantee the mosque's durability while preserving its heritage significance [32,33]. Conservation strategies include preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, maintenance, reproduction, redevelopment, and consolidation. Each option is meticulously justified to adhere to the ideal of minimal intervention [32,33]. Preventive maintenance is essential, encompassing scheduled inspections, cleaning, and repairs to avert degradation. It is bolstered by coordinated planning and community engagement to uphold the mosque's functionality and cultural significance [32]. Environmental factors, including the management of green density and urban land use surrounding mosque sites, are progressively integrated to safeguard the mosque's environment and spiritual atmosphere [34]. Regionally, regulatory frameworks such as the Abu Dhabi Mosque Development Regulations offer extensive guidelines

encompassing mosque planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance to ensure optimal practices throughout the mosque's lifecycle. These include cleaning programs, the replacement of temporary mosques with permanent structures, and centralized management by Islamic authorities [35]. Conservation initiatives prioritize using original materials, including lime and mortar, in old mosques, such as those in Bagerhat, Bangladesh, to preserve authenticity and structural integrity [36]. Mosque conservation policies provide a balanced strategy that honors historical authenticity, facilitates continued religious use, involves local communities, and adapts to modern urban environments. Thus, they assure the vibrancy and preservation of these heritage monuments for future generations [31, 32, 33]

5. Study Area Location

5.1. Site Location



Source: Google map (modified by author), Wikipedia

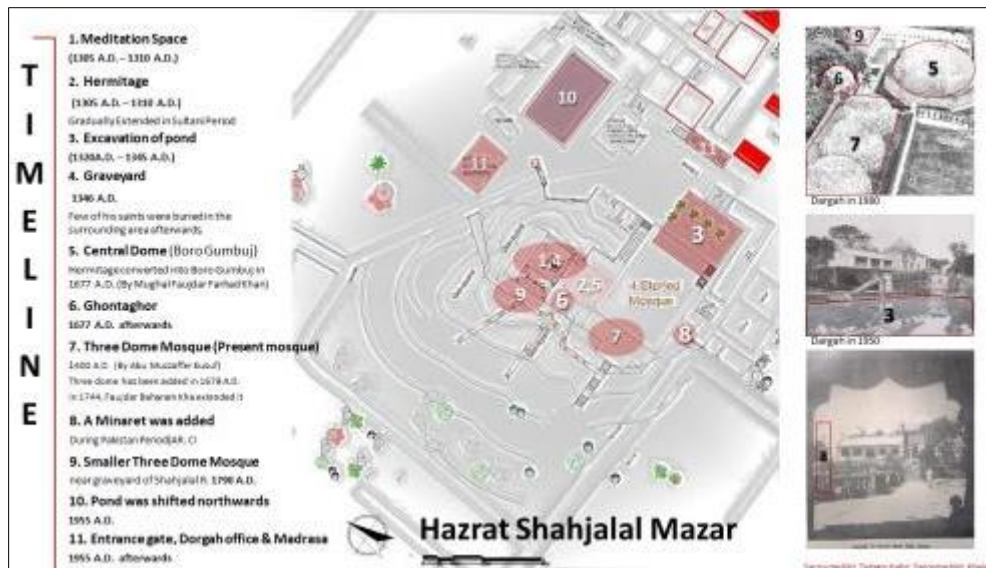
Figure 1 Study Area Location

5.2. Site Brief

Amborkhana Dargah is situated in the heart of Sylhet city, within the Amborkhana area, which is an important commercial and cultural zone of the city. It lies close to major landmarks such as the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to the north and Sylhet International Cricket Stadium, making it easily accessible. The area is well connected by road and public transport, located approximately 5 kilometers from Sylhet Railway Station. Amborkhana is part of Ward 1 under the Sylhet City Corporation, encompassing neighborhoods like Dargah Mahalla and Dargah Gate. The site is surrounded by significant educational institutions, including MC College and Sylhet Agricultural University and is near the famous shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.). This central location places the Amborkhana Dargah mosque within a vibrant urban context that blends religious, commercial and residential functions, while also serving as a key point for tourism and pilgrimage in Sylhet. The area's connectivity and proximity to green spaces and cultural landmarks enhance the mosque's prominence as a historic and living heritage site in the city.

5.3. Historical and Cultural Context of Mosques

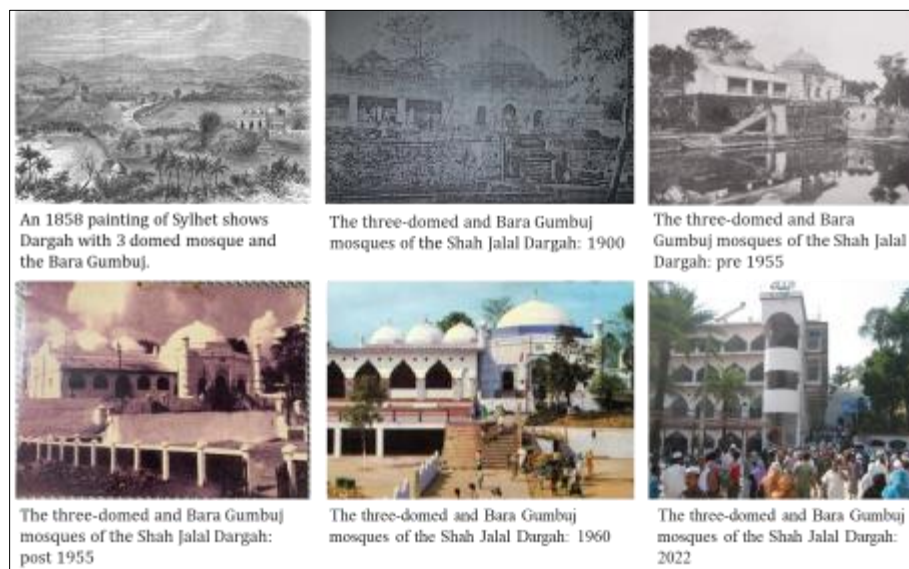
The spiritual and cultural milieu of Sylhet is intricately linked to the early Islamic period, significantly influenced by the advent of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.) in the 14th century. His presence signaled a significant transformation in native beliefs and lifestyles. The diagram illustrates that his meditation chambers and hermitage progressively transformed over decades into a central religious and communal hub, as seen by the increasing structures. The construction of the central domed mosque, along with the subsequent addition of three interconnected domes, gravesites, a sacred pond, and a minaret, illustrates the site's ongoing adaptation to serve the spiritual and communal needs of the population.



(Source: Sarqume Md. Teham Kabir, Sarqume Md. Khaled, Modified by Architecture 14th batch, Leading University)

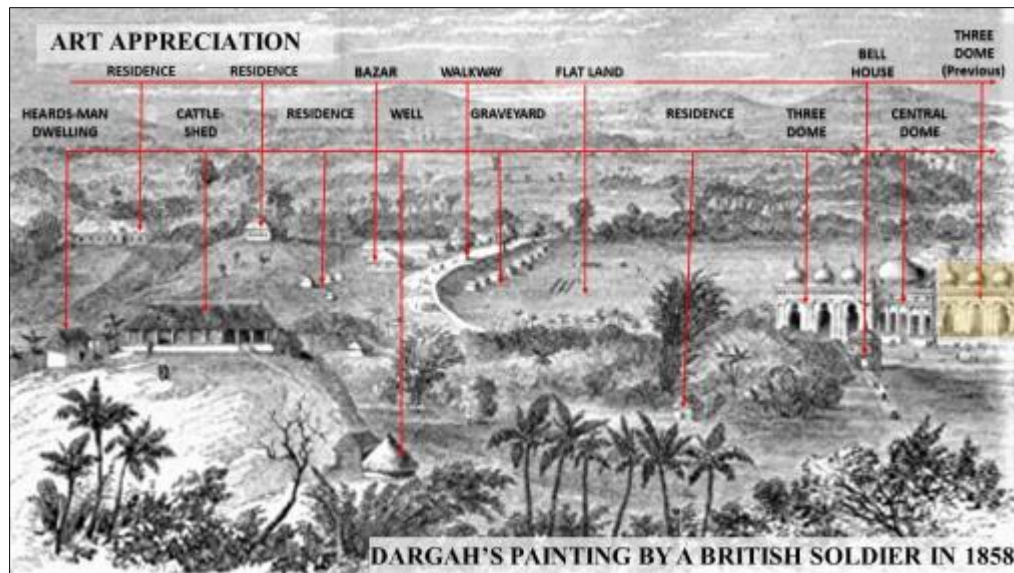
Figure 2 Historical Timeline

Similar to Amborkhana Dargah, mosques have traditionally served as sites of worship and as centers for education and community gathering. The interment of sacred individuals and the extensive cemetery underscore the mosque's significance as a venerated destination for pilgrimage and commemoration, drawing adherents and visitors from throughout the region. Centuries of expansions and architectural adjustments, as evidenced by historical photographs and alterations to the grounds, illustrate the mosque's lasting importance in the religious and cultural milieu of Sylhet. The Amborkhana Dargah is a dynamic hub for religious ceremonies, festivals, and daily prayers, reflecting Sylhet's Muslim community's interconnected spiritual, historical, and communal identities. This sacred location has transformed while maintaining its essential significance at the community's core for decades.



(Source শ্রীহট্ট থেকে সিলেট (ইসমাইল মাহমুদ), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Sylhet)

Figure 3 Historical Changes of Dargah Mosque

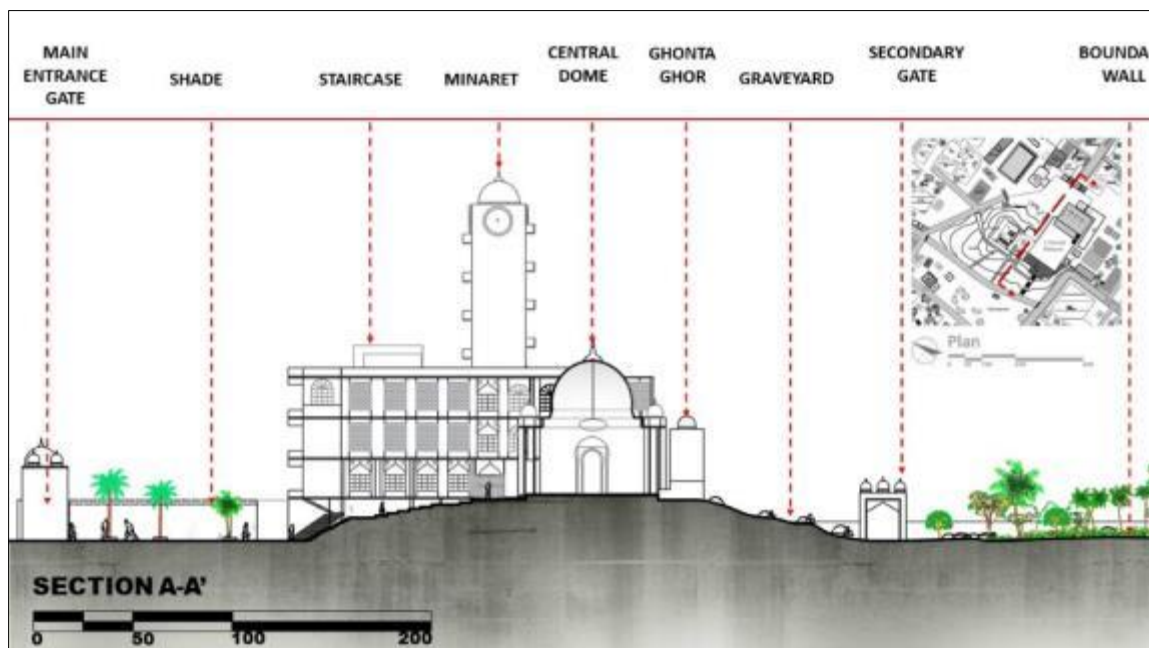


Source: Alamy; Bangladesh View of Sylhet 1858

Figure 4 Dargah's Painting by a British Soldier in 1858

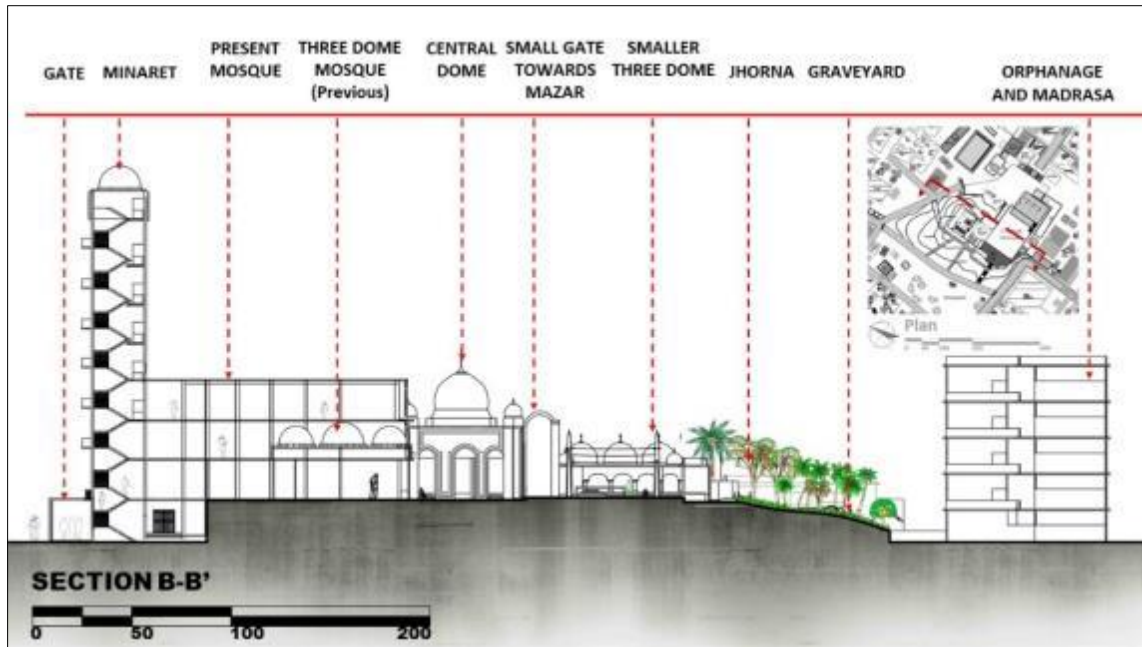
5.4. Architectural Documentation and Analysis

The architectural record of the Amborkhana Dargah mosque reveals a varied collection of traditional Islamic structural elements and analysis. The mosque features prominent pointed arches and multifoil arches in its elaborate window and entrance designs, which improve aesthetic appeal while effectively distributing weight. The mosque's prayer hall features a series of domes, each consisting of a drum, dome body, lotus, and pinnacle, exemplifying a blend of Sultanate and Mughal architectural influences. The construction of three domes is characteristic of mosque architecture in the region, providing both spatial magnificence and auditory benefits for congregational worship. Additionally, the pointed arches encase elaborate stained glass panels illustrating verses from the Quran, while the multifoil arched entrances greet visitors with aesthetic refinement.



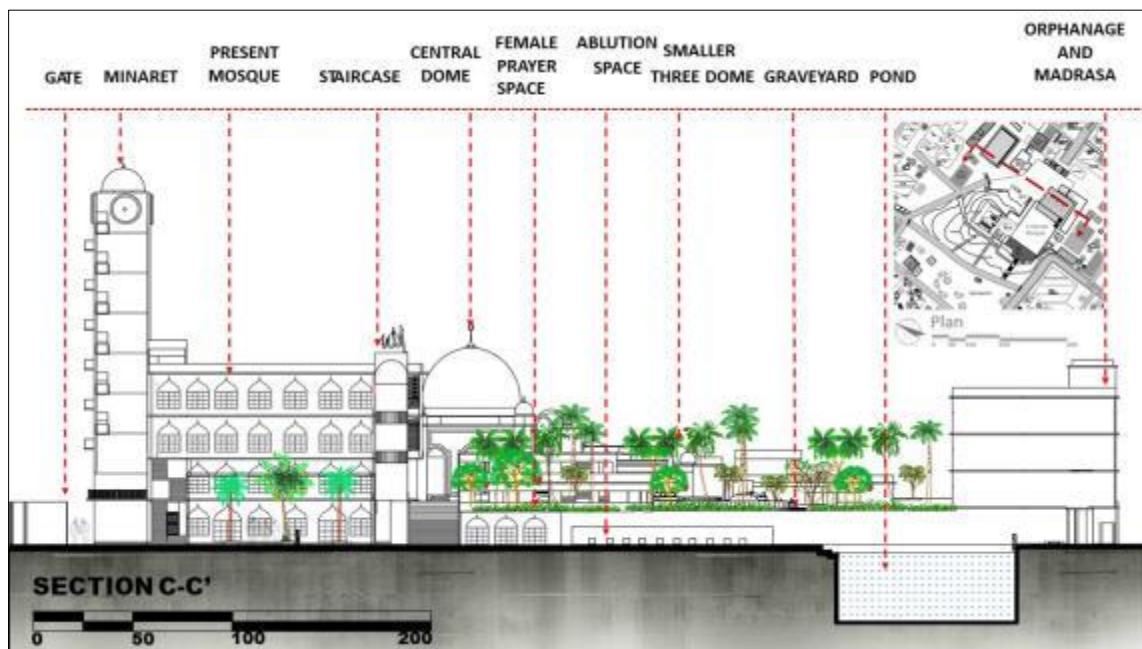
Source: Nakib, 14th Batch, Architecture, Leading University

Figure 5 Dargah mosque Section- AA'



Source: Nakib, 14th Batch, Architecture, Leading University

Figure 6 Dargah mosque Section- BB'



Source: Nakib, 14th Batch, Architecture, Leading University

Figure 7 Dargah mosque Section- CC'

Comprehensive cross-sectional maps with altitude designations reveal the mosque's spatial hierarchy, highlighting essential elements such as the main entrance, minaret, central dome, cemetery and surrounding environment. These areas provide insight into the mosque's connection with its inclined terrain and the integration of various functional and ceremonial spaces. The utilization of conventional materials and geometric lattice designs in windows and screens demonstrates a commitment to ventilation and privacy while enhancing the mosque's distinctive identity. The architectural documentation highlights the mosque's historical development, artistry, and the seamless integration of functionality, spirituality, and artistic expression.



Source: Author

Figure 8 The three-dome



Source: Author

Figure 9 Multifoil arch & Pointed Arch

5.5. Condition Assessment and Structural Analysis

The architectural embellishments and load-bearing structure of the Amborkhana Dargah mosque display clear indications of material deterioration and structural weakness that require further assessment. A prominent feature, such as the octagonal drum supporting the domes and the curved roofing, evidences weathering and surface deterioration, perhaps caused by extended exposure to environmental factors, including moisture and precipitation. Ornamental elements featuring botanical and floral motifs sculpted in stone and plaster have deteriorated, cracked, and partially destroyed, undermining the mosque's visual integrity. Structural components, including arches and load-bearing walls, exhibit minor fissures and settlement problems, possibly attributable to foundation displacement or inadequate maintenance over time. The deterioration patterns highlight weaknesses in the mosque's load-bearing components and ornamental finishes, emphasizing the need for thorough condition assessments and focused conservation efforts to stabilize the structure and protect its historical integrity while preserving its spiritual purpose.



Source: Author

Figure 10 Old One Dome



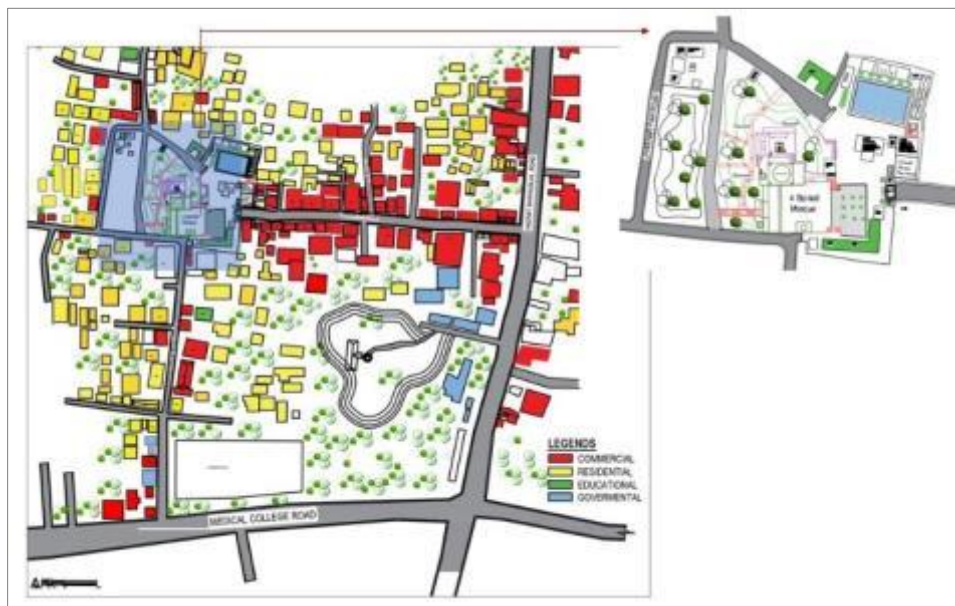
Source: Author

Figure 11 Old One Dome Inner Part

5.6. The environmental and urban context

5.6.1. Existing Land Use

The area surrounding the Amborkhana Dargah mosque presently accommodates a variety of religious, residential, commercial, and institutional activities. The mosque remains a significant spiritual and cultural icon while surrounding areas feature vibrant marketplaces, active stores, flourishing educational establishments, and densely populated residential developments. This diverse land use illustrates the mosque's organic integration into Sylhet City's urban fabric while presenting conservation challenges, including heavy traffic, increasing pollution, and ongoing encroachment. Overseeing the coexistence of dynamic urban activities near the ancient mosque site requires careful management to reconcile development with cultural conservation. The natural and urban surroundings of the Amborkhana Dargah mosque have evolved from a largely lush and expansive landscape to a densely developed urban region with less vegetation. These modifications highlight the urgent need for conservation measures that focus on the mosque's physical preservation and safeguarding its surrounding cultural landscape amid Sylhet's constantly changing urban environment.

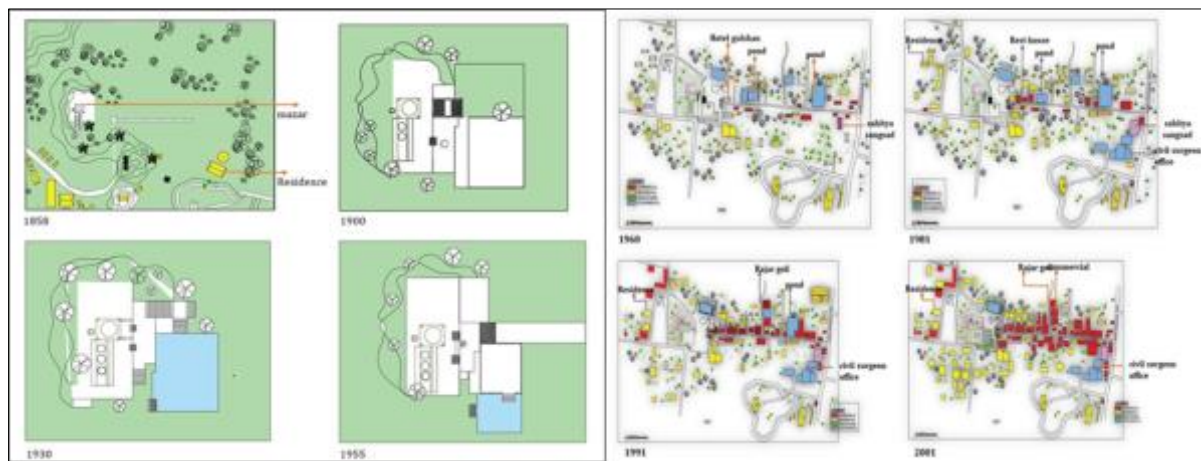


Source: Author

Figure 12 Existing land use

5.6.2. Chronological Changes (1858–2001)

Records and maps spanning decades depict Amborkhana's evolution from a natural landscape to a vibrant urban center. Initial images illustrate the mosque surrounded by verdant foliage and agricultural fields, with minimal constructions disrupting the scenery. In 1858 and 1900, flora and agriculture predominated, with the mosque as the only sign of human habitation. As the twentieth century advanced, population growth and urbanization consumed adjacent territories. By 1931 and 1955, residences, stores, and structures densely populated the once-serene mosque complex. The 1960 representation illustrates increasingly dense development encroaching against the diminishing boundaries of nature. By 1981, the open region had been eradicated by concrete and steel, leaving just a few vestiges of flora. The 1991 photograph illustrates the final vestiges of the natural buffer succumbing to urban expansion. The 2001 portrait depicts an entirely urbanized region, lacking any memory of the previous peacefulness that now envelops the mosque. The unyielding expansion of civilization eradicated the past to forge the present, converting sanctuaries into the crowded districts of modern urban existence.



Source: Author

Figure 13 Chronological changes of Study area

5.6.3. Green Density Changes (2001, 2008, 2013, 2022):

Satellite study from the turn of the century reveals a decline in vegetation surrounding the Amborkhana Dargah mosque. The imagery from 2001 depicted clusters of trees and verdant areas within and next to the mosque grounds, fostering a tranquil environment conducive to spiritual contemplation. Nevertheless, 2022 demonstrated how much this lush density had diminished due to increased construction, wider thoroughfares, and commercial development. The reduction of flora affects the local climate and aesthetic value of the mosque surroundings and influences the site's cultural landscape and historical integrity. Moreover, the decline in vegetation has disrupted the tranquil ambiance essential for visitors to the hallowed site. Despite the inevitability of growth and development, enhanced planning and preservation initiatives may have protected the sacredness of this place of worship while permitting regulated alterations to the surrounding environment.



Source: Author

Figure 14 Green density changes of Study area

5.7. Cultural and Religious Activities

The Amborkhana Dargah mosque in Sylhet is a dynamic hub of religious and cultural activity, exemplifying its enduring legacy significance within the local Muslim community. The mosque conducts the five daily prayers (Salah), constituting its primary religious function, drawing consistent worshippers from Sylhet and nearby regions. In addition to regular prayers, the mosque functions as a site for special religious assemblies, including Milad (praise recitations), Zikr (remembrance of God), and Quranic recitations, promoting spiritual involvement and community cohesion. During major Islamic festivals and the yearly Urs honoring Hazrat Shah Jalal, the location serves as a central point for extensive gatherings, pilgrimages, and devotional practices, solidifying its status as a spiritual center. The mosque's incorporation into the social fabric is evident through educational programs and community events conducted on its premises, fostering religious education and social unity. This continuous religious practice and community involvement highlight the mosque's significance as a historical edifice and a vibrant location that preserves Sylhet's Islamic cultural character. [37, 1, 38]

5.8. Community Engagement and Management

The preservation of Amborkhana Dargah mosque and community participation are accomplished via the collaborative efforts of its Muslim devotees, religious leaders, and diverse partners committed to safeguarding the cultural heritage of this historic relic. Residents engage in the mosque's maintenance by participating in frequent prayers, celebrations, and social gatherings, which cultivate a robust connection to the place of worship and a sense of stewardship for its

structural integrity and artistic elements. Religious leaders and custodians organize daily rituals, maintenance tasks, and cultural events imbued with spiritual significance that strengthen the mosque's position as a socio-cultural center. Moreover, cooperation among mosque officials, local authorities, and heritage organizations confronts conservation challenges by pursuing equitable solutions that honor urban development while preserving the mosque's historical and aesthetic significance that characterizes Sylhet. This comprehensive governance approach facilitates ongoing religious activities and awareness initiatives to engage various stakeholders committed to maintaining the mosque as a valued community monument for future generations.

6. Results and Discussion; Conservation Strategies

Comparative studies of mosque conservation across many locations reveal shared difficulties, including material degradation, unauthorized restoration, environmental stresses, and urban expansion, which are pertinent to the Ambarkhana Dargah mosque. Research conducted in Sulaimaniyah, Iraq, indicates that compliance with international charters such as the Venice Charter and tailored conservation measures markedly enhances preservation results by sustaining structural and cultural authenticity [39]. Community engagement and governmental assistance have been essential in preserving mosque heritage, shown by Jakarta's 18th-century mosques, where local commitment compensates for financial and informational deficiencies [40]. These results highlight why local stakeholders should be involved in conservation activities at Ambarkhana Dargah in order to achieve sustainable governance.

Chronological land use and green density variation analysis of Ambarkhana Dargah revealed that urban and environmental factors have led to strong vegetation loss and urban sprawl, with an increase of monitoring stations' microclimate. Therefore, urban design strategies have to be developed and integrated within the conservation program to restrain land use and green areas to the culturally significant territory around the mosque while maintaining its reverential atmosphere. This is in accordance with overarching principles support comprehensive interdisciplinary integration of conservation and the environment.

Sustainability and energy efficiency in mosque architecture are becoming essential concerns in conservation discussions. Research conducted at St Mary's Mosque in Sydney highlights the importance of water conservation during ablution and the implementation of energy-efficient architectural modifications that do not interfere with religious practices [41,42]. For Ambarkhana Dargah, the integration of ecological materials along with passive design features like ventilation via the traditional lattice and preservation of shaded green spaces enhances elements of environmental design without undermining the architectural integrity of the building.

Technological instruments such as digital documentation, 3D scanning, and GIS mapping, suggested in recent conservation evaluations, provide efficient methods for precise recording and monitoring of the mosque's state [39]. These techniques allow the exact detection of structural susceptibilities and aid in maintenance work which is very important due to the mosque's material decay and structural decay problems.

In regard to the Conservation of Ambarkhana Dargah mosque, there is need of an approach which incorporates the global conservatory ethics, local culture, geo-ecological planning, ecological contextualism, and design sustainability. The mosque's architectural and cultural values, as well as its operational functions, will be preserved through a specially formulated conservation approach based on the Venice Charter and regional comparative analyses while adapting to the rapidly changing urban environment of Sylhet.

7. Conclusion

Sylhet houses the Ambarkhana Dargah Mosque, a cultural, religious, and architectural monument that encapsulates centuries of Islamic legacy. This essay traces the development of the mosque's history and architecture, as well as its function as a modern place of worship. However, the mosque is characterized by physical decay, urban encroachment, and a reduction of adjacent green spaces, which present challenges for conservation.

The mosque's preservation necessitates the incorporation of international conservation standards as outlined in the Venice Charter, in conjunction with local regulations. The architectural authenticity of the mosque must be reconciled with sustainable environmental policies that maintain green buffers while tackling additional ecological issues, including heightened urban development. This underscores Ambarkhana's spiritual essence and tenacity within Sylhet's changeable landscape.

Comparative analyses of mosque conservation globally underscore the significance of stakeholder involvement, scientific documentation, preventive maintenance, and the application of advanced technologies for the monitoring and management of heritage structures. Implementing these best practices, the conservation of Amborkhana Dargah can exemplify the preservation of Islamic history in swiftly developing metropolitan settings.

The preservation of the Amborkhana Dargah mosque guarantees the continuation of its cultural legacy, enhances the community's religious life, and contributes to Sylhet's historical urban landscape for future generations.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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