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JAMIA MOSQUE RAWALPINDI: AN EPITOME OF ARCHITECTURAL SPLENDOR AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT

The Jamia Mosque Rawalpindi stands as one of the most splendid examples of Islamic art and architecture. It has played a pivotal role in the life of the Muslim community, serving as a focal point for religious, social, and cultural activities. This research paper explores the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of the mosque. The architectural analysis examines the mosque in its entirety, highlighting its unique features, intricate designs, and symbolic elements. The research adopts a comprehensive approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. A thorough survey of the masjid was conducted, including interviews with the Imam and caretakers at various intervals. The mosque's continual renovations reflect a commitment to preserving its historical and architectural integrity, as it stands as a symbol of unity, faith, and architectural brilliance in Rawalpindi's history.

Keywords: Islamic Architecture, Fresco Paintings, Community History, Mosque Architecture, Religious Symbolism

Introduction

Mosques (*Masajid*) have long served as epicenters of Muslim communities, embodying a multifaceted role that extends beyond religious worship. These sacred spaces function as spiritual centers where individuals gather for prayers, fostering a profound connection with their faith. Beyond the religious sphere, mosques act as hubs for community gatherings, cultural preservation, and educational initiatives. They stand as unifying forces, shaping the holistic development and well-being of Muslim communities by intertwining spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions.

The Jamia Mosque Rawalpindi occupies a central and dynamic role within the

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Muslim community, contributing to its spiritual, educational, social, and cultural life. Located opposite *Purana Qila* Road near Raja Bazaar, the mosque has given its name to the road itself. Its influence extends beyond architectural and religious significance, actively shaping and strengthening the collective identity of the community it serves. Many Hindu temples still stand near the mosque, reflecting the area's pre-partition Hindu majority. Historical accounts note resistance from the local non-Muslim population, particularly Hindus, against the construction of Jamia Mosque. Despite these challenges, the mosque was successfully built and remains a vital part of Rawalpindi's cultural and historical landscape.

Similarly, the *Goliyon Wali Masjid* in Rawalpindi, also known as the *Shahi Masjid* and constructed during Sher Shah Suri's reign, bears witness to significant events from the Sikh era, as evidenced by bullet marks on its dome. The involvement of prominent Kashmiri Muslims in maintaining the mosque during Ranjit Singh's rule highlights the complex and diverse history of Rawalpindi. These mosques collectively stand as symbols of resilience, cultural heritage, and the interplay of various communities over time.

On 13 June 1926, a significant Sikh procession paraded through the streets of Rawalpindi, comprising approximately 15,000 individuals accompanied by a musical band. As the procession approached the Jamia Mosque, a delegation of Muslims requested that the band cease playing. This appeal was refused, and the Sikhs intensified their activity, advancing towards the mosque until their leaders intervened to prevent escalation. The procession eventually continued, with the Sikhs regarding their passage near the mosque as a symbolic victory. Tensions, however, heightened on the night of 14–15 June when large groups of Muslims gathered. The ensuing riots, marked by sporadic violence, resulted in 14 deaths (11 Muslims, two Sikhs, and one Hindu) and injuries to 46 individuals (27 Muslims, seven Sikhs, and 12 Hindus) (The Examiner; 18 June 1926: 5). Following the unrest, the Jamia Mosque once again served as the starting point for the Rabiul Awwal procession, marking a significant continuation of religious traditions despite earlier tensions.

According to local accounts, the revered saint Pir Meher Ali Shah of Golra Sharif frequently visited the Jamia Mosque. The mosque is also popularly known as *"Neeli Masjid"* (the Blue Mosque) due to its distinctive blue color, which adds to its visual appeal and cultural identity within the community. Historical narratives reveal that in 1903, a small mosque previously stood at the site with a limited courtyard, forcing worshippers to pray on the roadside. Recognizing the need for a larger space, Qazi Gohar Rehman, in consultation with Mian Qutub-ud-Din and Mian Nabi Baksh, sought an alternative location for a Jamia Mosque. Since the site was waterlogged, the local population worked tirelessly for three days and nights, filling it with soil to make construction feasible (interview from local community).

The King of Kabul, Shah Mohammad Ayub Sheraz Haider, and Qazi Siraj-ud-Din, a barrister in Rawalpindi, toured Punjab to collect funds for the mosque's construction. Mr. Karim Baksh from Peshawar donated one lakh rupees, and later, a room was built within the mosque premises for him, which came to be known as the Auqaf Office, where he visited every Thursday. The local Muslim community contributed generously, with women donating jewelry out of religious devotion. When funds ran short, Qazi Gohar Ali even sold his own house. Mr. Adamjee also donated ten

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thousand rupees for the mosque's construction.

The Jamia Mosque was completed in six years. Historian Sheraz Haider notes that key figures in its construction included Qazi Gohar Ali, Mian Nabi Baksh, and Mian Qutab-ud-Din. Afzal Parvaiz was appointed as the first khateeb, and the inaugural prayer was led by Syed Mahmood Shah in the presence of Pir Meher Ali Shah of Golra Sharif. Ghulam Nabi Kamil was entrusted with the intricate fresco work in the mosque's interior hall.

The mosque underwent renovations in 2005, funded by Mian Muhammad Sahab and Khalifa Khawaja Ahmad Meharawi of Pindi Ghaib (Interview with Mr. Zaheer Ullah Khan, caretaker of the mosque). The renovations included replacing the glass doors and restoring the dome, which had deteriorated over time.

Methodology

The research employed a comprehensive approach, integrating both primary and secondary sources. Several books and research papers on Muslim architecture, accessed through online platforms and public libraries, were referenced. A detailed survey of the masjid was conducted, which included interviews with the Imam and caretakers at various intervals. Consultations with scholars specializing in Muslim architecture were also sought periodically to enhance the study's depth. Regular visits to the mosque further contributed to assessing its overall atmosphere and cultural significance.

Architecture of Mosque

Layout of the Mosque

The mosque has a trapezoidal layout (Fig. 1). The primary entrance is located on the eastern side and features non-functional Minarets adorned with *Multani Sheeshakari* (mirror work). The entrance is distinguished by exquisite Frescoes on the walls, showcasing intricate floral designs. Unfortunately, in 2002, the original Frescoes were replaced during renovation efforts. Despite this alteration, the *Multani Sheeshakari* on the Minarets has been preserved, maintaining a unique and culturally significant element of the mosque's architectural heritage.

The Masjid comprises two Prayer Halls and a large open Courtyard. The main Prayer Hall contains seven compartments separated by elegant Arches, with its walls entirely embellished with Fresco paintings. *Sheeshakari* can also be observed on the Mehrab, adding to the decorative richness. This hall features seven brightly decorated wooden *Sheesham* doors that open into the second prayer hall. The second prayer hall is similarly adorned, with elaborate floral motifs and calligraphic panels, and it includes nine glass doors that open into the expansive courtyard.

While the domes of the mosque may not rival the grandeur of traditional Mughal domes, they exhibit a distinctive character through the incorporation of an odd number of arches. This design choice, inspired by Mughal architectural traditions, appears to serve both aesthetic and structural purposes, enhancing the mosque's individuality.

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Fig. 1: Lay-out of Jamia Mosque Rawalpindi

Main Entrance

The entrance portal of the mosque is located on the eastern side and is richly adorned with *Aainakari (or Sheeshakari)* work (Fig. 2). It presents a splendid *Iwan*-like appearance. Four elegant Minarets flank the sides of the gateway, and on one Minaret, the inscriptions "*Ya Allah," "Ya Muhammad,"* and the *Kalma Tayyaba*[1] in Arabic appear in white color.

On both sides of the main gateway are two *Jharoka*-style monuments, each with supporting Pillars. These are beautifully decorated with intricate *Jali* work. The gate itself features three flights of steps leading to a pointed Arch entrance, surmounted by the inscription of the *Kalma Tayyaba*. Above, three windows are present, each with a protruding cornice beneath them. Surmounting the windows is the faded inscription of the mosque's name and sect, weathered by the passage of time. The windows are topped with a triple multi-foil arch design in blue, bordered with blue petal motifs. The spandrels once displayed the names of Allah and Muhammad (SAW), which have also faded over time. Surrounding this area is a border featuring calligraphy of *Ayat-ul-Kursi* executed in mirror work. The uppermost border displays Darood Sharif from *Gulistan* by Sa'di Shirazi.

At the top of the main gateway, an articulating parapet occupies the center, flanked by two prominent minarets at each corner. Smaller pinnacles are also visible at the base of these minarets, enhancing the overall architectural elegance.

[1] Laa ilaaha illal-lahu Muhammadur-Rasoolullah

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Fig. 2: Main Gateway of the Mosque[2]

[2] All photos are clicked by present researcher (Noman Fazal)

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Fig. 3: Inside View of the Mosque

Fig. 4: Ornamentation on the main gateway

Courtyard and Ablution Tank

The courtyard is paved with red baked bricks arranged in a hexagonal pattern. An ablution tank is located on the right side of the courtyard (Fig. 5). This tank has been non-functional since 2002, as the Auqaf Department provided the mosque with new taps (Interview with local person, Mr. Zaheer). The ablution tank is lined with light blue tiles and bordered with dark blue tiles. At its center is a square cube, contributing to the geometric aesthetics of the space.

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Fig. 5: Ablution tank in courtyard

Main Facade

The outer entrance doors, nine in total, are made of glass (Fig. 6). The upper sections of these doors are adorned with pointed and tri-foil arches in blue, while their spandrels feature oval-shaped medallions inscribed with the names of Allah and the four Caliphs of Islam. The squinches supporting the central Dome are embellished with intricate floral scrolls, harmoniously blending blue and brown hues. Above them, an upper running Bordering Panel, distinguished by its brown color, is decorated with delicate floral scrolls and serves as the canvas for miniature roses (Fig. 7).

A row of small blue panels, designed in a *mehrabi* pattern, contains the attributes of Allah and verses of Islamic poetry. This is surmounted by a row of small blue petals and merlons. At the base of the roofline, a continuous border of Pinnacles adds to the architectural detailing.

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Fig. 6: Main facade of the Mosque

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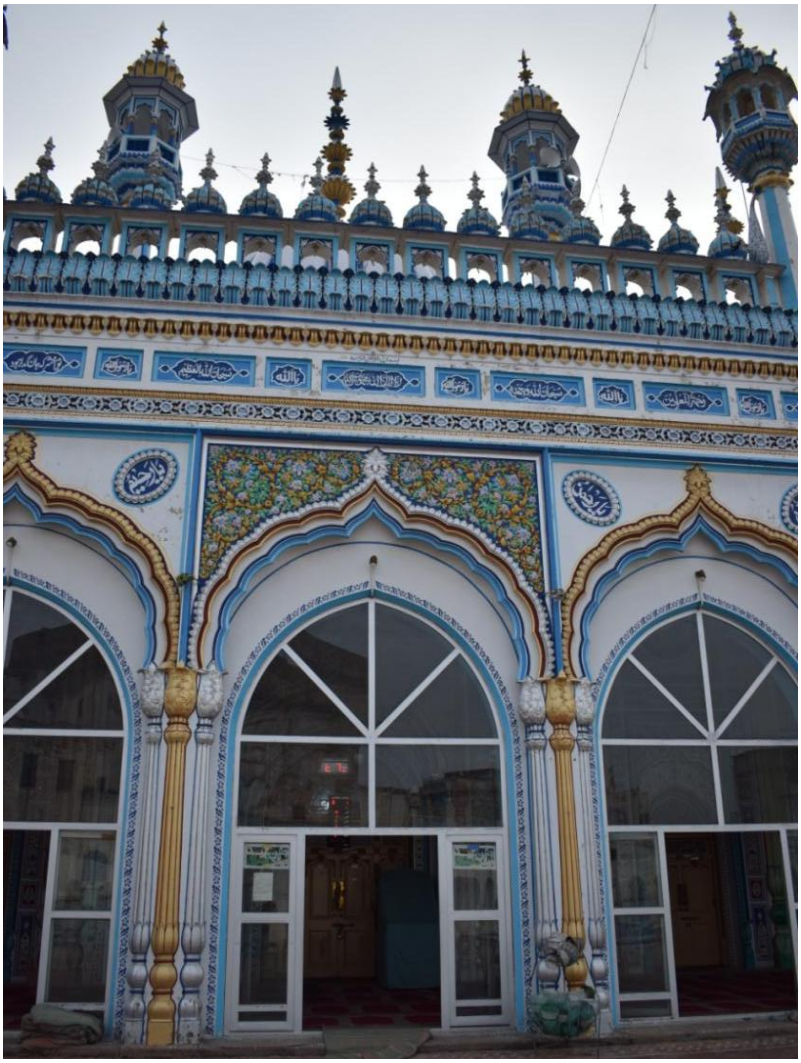

Fig. 7: Ornamentation on Main facade of the Mosque

Dome

The mosque is crowned with three bulbous domes (Fig. 8), with the central dome notably larger than the flanking ones. These domes feature ribbing highlighted by blue lining and are topped with an elegant inverted lotus design at their summits. The drums supporting the domes are embellished with decorative acanthus leaf motifs, enhancing their classical appeal. Additionally, the finials crowning the domes incorporate a lotus-shaped design, adding an extra layer of intricate detailing to the mosque's architectural aesthetics. This design not only reflects historical influences but also introduces unique embellishments that contribute significantly to the overall grandeur of the mosque.

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Fig. 8: Closer view of the dome

Minarets

Minarets serve as a landmark of a mosque (Aziz 2004: 351). Symbolically, they act as communicators between man and the heavens (ibid: 399). The mosque is adorned with eight substantial minarets encircling its domes, which stand out as a striking architectural feature. Four of these minarets are positioned at each corner of the mosque, while the remaining four are centrally located. Each minaret features a false balcony at its summit. Although non-functional, these minarets contribute a distinctive visual element to the mosque's design. In addition, four smaller minarets are strategically placed at intervals, enhancing the aesthetic balance of the structure. This architectural arrangement not only amplifies the mosque's grandeur but also reflects a thoughtful integration of traditional design principles.

The Minarets are beautifully adorned with lotus petal designs (Fig. 9). The intricate craftsmanship and the deliberate incorporation of floral motifs enrich the cultural and artistic character of the minarets, further elevating the overall aesthetic appeal of the mosque's architecture.

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Fig. 9: Closer view of the Minarets

Main Prayer Hall

The main prayer chamber of the mosque is intricately designed and divided into seven compartments by a series of elegant arches (Fig. 10). The soffits of these arches are beautifully adorned with star-shaped motifs, accompanied by panels below that depict scrolls of colorful flowers and delicate leaves.

The entire hall is embellished with exquisite fresco paintings, featuring a rich variety of floral patterns, vines, fruit dishes, vases, and geometric motifs (Fig. 11). Each compartment exhibits a unique color palette, with floral panels typically incorporating shades of blue, gold, green, red, and orange.

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Fig. 10: Main Prayer Hall

Mehrab

The main central *Mehrab* of the mosque is distinguished by its rich decoration, featuring intricate *Sheeshakari* (mirror work) in shades of white, light blue, and dark blue (Fig. 13). The Spandrels of the *Mehrab* are adorned with motifs of Arches and various floral designs, accompanied by inscriptions of the names of Allah and Muhammad (PBUH). In front of the Mehrab stands a four-stepped *Minbar*, which, according to Mr. Zaheer Ullah Khan (caretaker of the mosque), was gifted by Ameer Habibullah Khan, the King of Afghanistan (Fig. 14).

Above the Mehrab, there is a decorative Panel inscribed with *"Bismillah"* in dark red and *Kalima Tayyaba* in dark green. On both sides of the panel, baskets of flowers add to the ornamental richness of the design.

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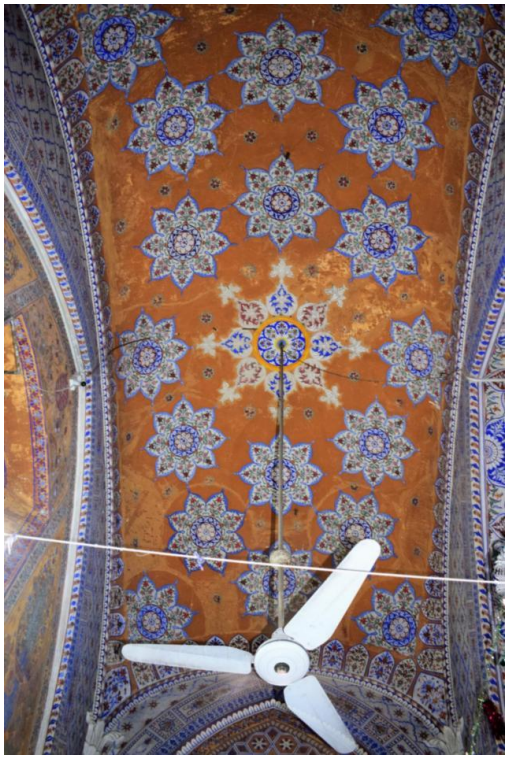
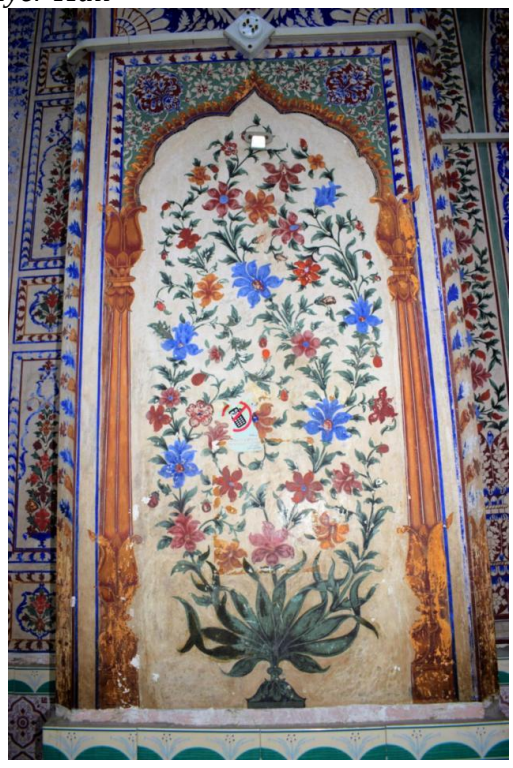
Fig. 10: Ornamentation work on Left Side wall of 6th compartment of Main Prayer Hall





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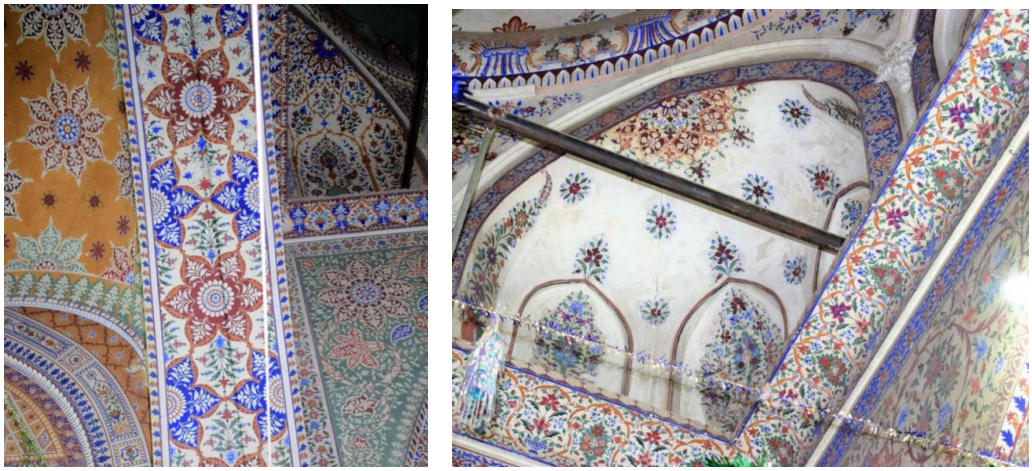

Fig. 12: Glimpses of the Fresco Work inside Main Prayer Hall

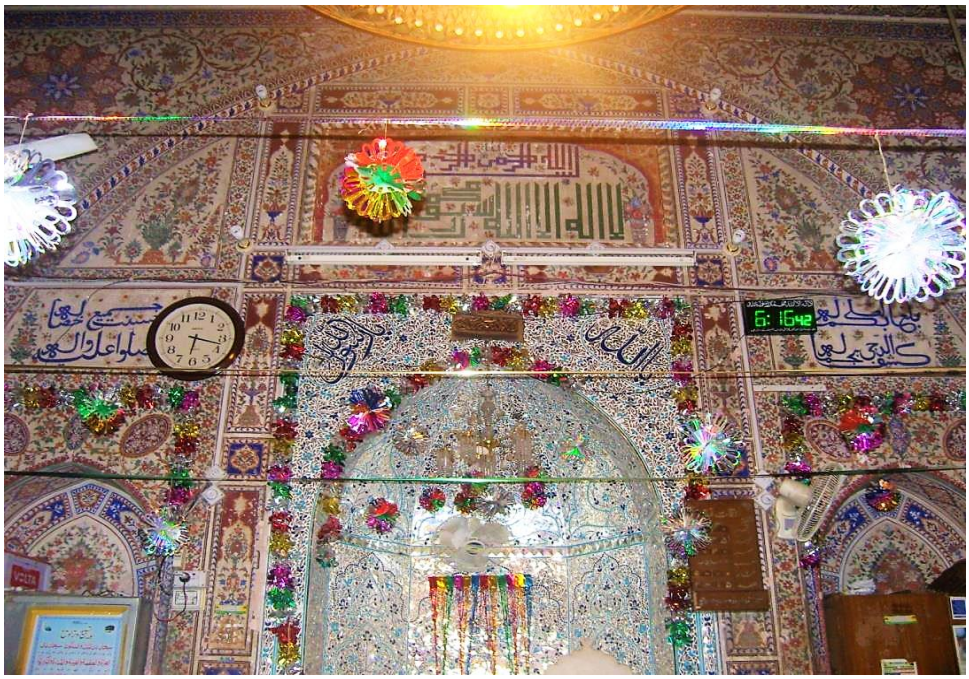

Fig. 13: Main Mehrab in the center of the Main Prayer Hall

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Fig. 14: Mimbar of the Main Prayer Hall

Second Prayer Hall

This hall is relatively larger than the main hall and features distinct painted motifs (Fig. 15). It is characterized by a graceful white color scheme, prominent decorative pillars, multi-foil arches on the doors, and star-patterned designs (Fig. 16). Although the hall may have undergone alterations over time, these features continue to contribute to its unique aesthetic. The space reflects a harmonious blend of traditional architectural elements with more modern color palettes and design choices.

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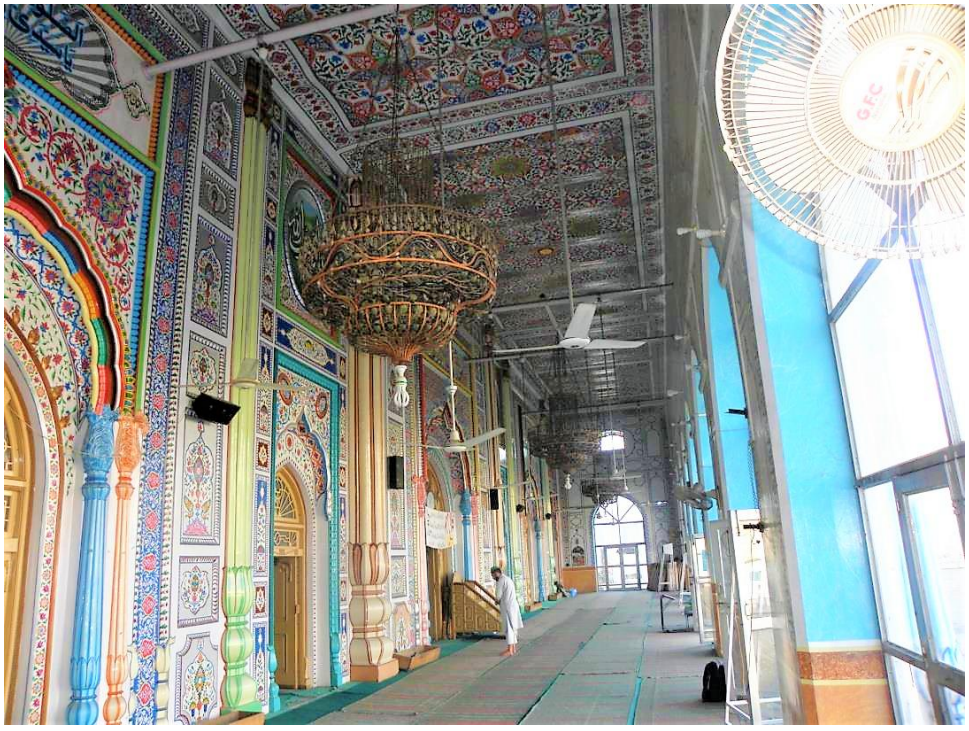

Fig. 15: Second Prayer Hall

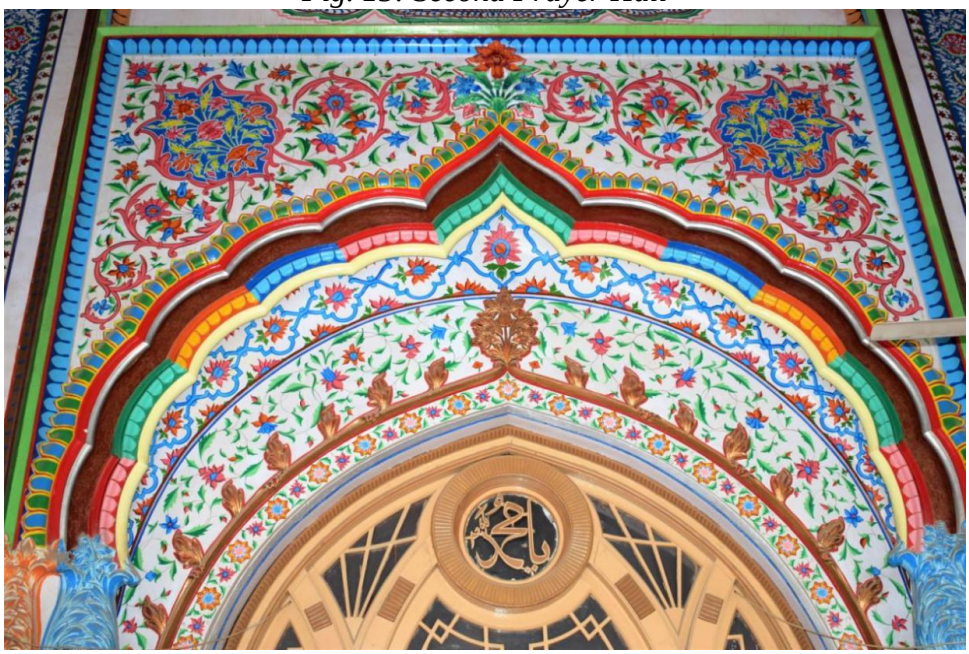

Fig. 16: Ornamentation work on one of the door of Second Prayer Hall

Discussion

The Jamia Mosque in Raja Bazaar, Rawalpindi, stands as a testament to resilience and determination in the face of opposition from the local Hindu community during its construction. Overcoming numerous challenges, the mosque has become a focal point for the Muslim community in the city. Its establishment not only signifies the architectural and cultural richness of the region but also underscores the importance of

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communal unity in the face of adversity.

The mosque exhibits both local and foreign influences in its architectural features. The entrance gate is embellished with *Multani Sheeshakari* (mirror work), a craft with a longstanding presence in South Punjab. Traditionally used to decorate the interior walls and ceilings of shrines and mosques, *Sheeshakari* also gave rise to the famed *Sheesh Mahals*—expansive rooms in *havelis* and palaces adorned with intricate mirror work. Notable examples of this craftsmanship can be found in the Walled City of Lahore, Bahawalpur, Taunsa Sharif, Multan, and other locations. Artisans from Multan, renowned for their mastery of this art form, were often commissioned for significant projects within the region and beyond. According to Sajid Vandal, the lineage families of *Sheeshakari* artisans in Multan trace their heritage to ancestors who adorned Mughal-era structures with intricate embellishments (Vandal 2011: 128).

The dominant use of blue on the mosque's main façade has led to its popular moniker, *Neeli Masjid*. The color is primarily derived from *Multani* tiles, traditionally created by combining 7% cobalt oxide with 100% powdered glaze, with water added to achieve the desired consistency (ibid: 112). Some authors have interpreted cobalt blue as symbolizing the night, while turquoise blue represents the day (ibid).

The mosque's three bulbous domes reflect Mughal-era architectural inspiration, with a notable parallel to the *Badshahi Masjid* in Lahore. The inverted Lotus designs at the base of the domes and minarets, however, are indicative of Sikh architectural influence. Sikh architecture contributed ornamental Minarets that serve decorative rather than functional purposes, as seen in this mosque.

In the main prayer chamber, traditional frescoes adorn the walls, yet deviations from historical materials and techniques are evident. The origins of wall painting in Punjab are deeply rooted in history, with the Mughal era marking the zenith of fresco art—characterized by exceptional design, technique, and craftsmanship. This artistic tradition flourished in monuments such as the Maryam Zamani Mosque, Lahore Fort, and Shalimar Gardens. Even during the Sikh period, fresco painting persisted in havelis, forts, palaces, temples, and gurdwaras across the region. The authentic fresco technique involved painting on wet lime plaster, allowing natural pigments to absorb into the surface. Sadly, this method is now endangered, with only a few practitioners remaining. Contemporary practices often involve dry plaster and oil paints, a significant departure from the original technique (ibid: 121). This fusion of old and new adds a unique character to the *Jamia Masjid,* reflecting the adaptability of local architectural practices and a synthesis of tradition with contemporary influences.

The central *Mehrab* is further accentuated by exquisite *Sheeshakari*, adding a reflective dimension to the richly adorned Prayer Chamber. Traditionally, *Sheeshakari* was applied directly onto walls and ceilings, using well-drawn designs and skillfully embedded glass pieces. Today, the technique often involves creating chipboard panels that are later affixed to surfaces. Despite such changes, the finesse of this craft remains, representing an evolving tradition refined over two centuries (ibid: 128).

The Second Hall, though less elaborately decorated than the main prayer hall, underwent renovations in 2002 that resulted in the loss of its original frescoes. It now features painted vegetal and floral motifs executed in more contemporary hues.

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The mosque's continual renovations highlight an enduring commitment to preserving and enhancing this architectural gem. Beyond its intricate ornamentation, the Jamia Mosque holds profound historical significance as a spiritual and communal center for the Muslim community in Rawalpindi.

Conclusion

Jamia Mosque Rawalpindi stands as a testament to the rich and diverse history of the region, reflecting the intricate tapestry of cultural, religious, and architectural influences that have shaped its existence. As a significant religious and cultural landmark, the mosque has played a central role in the lives of the Muslim community, serving not only as a place of worship but also as a hub for cultural preservation and community gatherings.

The architectural features of Jamia Mosque exhibit a harmonious synthesis of traditional Islamic elements with influences from Central Asian, Iranian, Sikh, and Mughal traditions. The mosque's layout, its richly adorned Entrance, and expansive Courtyard contribute to its aesthetic and functional appeal. The presence of bulbous domes, soaring minarets, and the distinctive *Mehrab*—embellished with intricate fresco paintings, *Sheeshakari* (mirror work), and calligraphy—demonstrates the remarkable craftsmanship of its architects and the devotion of the local community.

The mosque's role in historical events, such as the 1926 Sikh procession and the ensuing tensions, underscores its prominence in the collective memory of Rawalpindi's residents. Its involvement in religious processions and its association with eminent historical figures, including Pir Meher Ali Shah, further amplify its cultural and spiritual significance. The Jamia Mosque thus emerges not merely as a place of spiritual connection but as a living monument to the city's layered and diverse history—one where different communities once coexisted and contributed to the construction and preservation of this architectural marvel.

In essence, Jamia Mosque Rawalpindi embodies resilience, cultural richness, and the shared history of the community it serves. As a symbol of unity, faith, and architectural brilliance, it continues to inspire and remain a source of pride for the people of Rawalpindi.

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