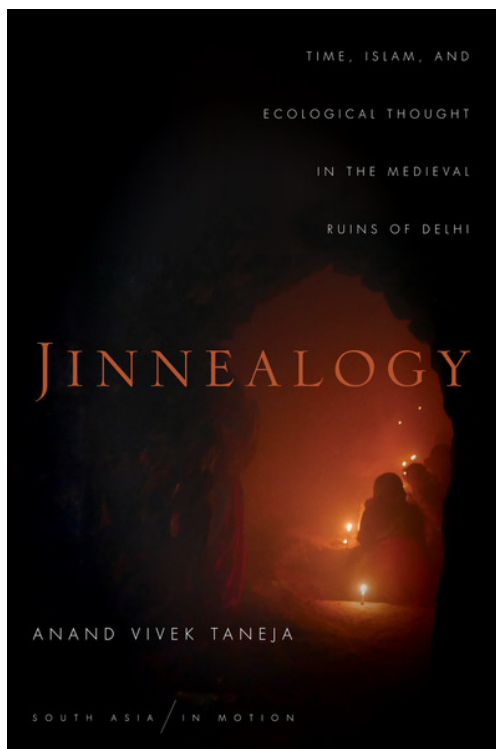


Long Read Review: Rethinking and Redefining Islam in South Asia

*Nicholas H A Evans (LSE) goes on a journey through India's past with Anand Vivek Taneja's new book **Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Dehli** to find an analysis that complicates simple narratives about religion and offers anthropologists and ethnographers new reasons and methods to explore the definition of what Islam is in South Asia.*

Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Dehli. Anand Vivek Taneja. Stanford University Press. 2017.

What is Islam, and who is a Muslim? These are questions that animate discussions in much of the world, and which consume the intellectual endeavors of vibrant and inquiring minds. They are old and unresolved questions that seem unlikely to yield us definitive answers any time soon. They are also questions which our discipline appears to have collectively decided are not very 'anthropological', in spite of the fact that we are now producing anthropologies of Islam at an ever increasing rate. Indeed, although attempts to define Islam enjoyed something of an anthropological moment from the 1970s through to the 80s, we now mostly seem content to leave these debates to our interlocutors. As such, we all seem to be in agreement that there is not much point in trying to define an object as nebulous as Islam. Moreover, we do not feel the need to do so, for when pushed to give some kind of account of Islam, we can always fall back upon Talal Asad's famous idea that Islam is best thought of as a discursive tradition. *Islam*, we can tell ourselves, *is best defined as an argument over how to define Islam*.



There are some fairly solid reasons why anthropologists might choose to remain silent on the issue of whether something is Islamic, particularly in a place such as India, where statements about what is and what is not Islamic are rarely neutral. In India today, to say that something is Islamic is to attribute to it an exclusive identity, to state, in other words, *that it is not Hindu*. In practice, this means that no matter what the identity of the speaker, if they define something in modern India as 'Islamic', they are participating in an act of exclusion. This happens in a very obvious and self-explanatory way when members of the present Hindu-nationalist government of India describe something as Islamic. In doing so, they are evidently highlighting its foreignness, its un-Indian-ness. They are, in short, identifying it as matter out of place. Reformist Muslims, however, are just as likely to be engaged in acts of exclusion when they make claims about what is and is not Islamic. Fearful of their position in society and lacking the resources to simply be Muslim in an unselfconscious manner, pious revivalists in India approach the issue of defining Islam as a fraught process of drawing boundaries, excluding others, and purifying the faith. This is a world that I know all too well, for my own fieldwork has been conducted with Ahmadiyya Muslims, the quintessential heretics of modern South Asian Islam, who are both the objects of such acts of exclusion, and in their own way perpetrators of this desire to purify the faith. In sum, it is hard to define Islam in India today in a way that embraces hospitality and openness to the other. Definitions of Islam always seem to exclude, to hark towards violence, and to invite

separation. Given this state of affairs, we might argue that anthropologists are right to refrain from joining the chorus of voices clamoring to say what is and is not Islamic. After all, why get caught up in such exclusionary practices when we can instead sit back and analyze them?

For all the passion that debates about the boundaries of Islam can inspire, one remarkable feature of life in contemporary India is nonetheless just how taken-for-granted the distinction between the Islamic and the Hindu is at a quotidian level. The long term nature of the processes by which these categories have become mutually exclusive means that knowing the distinction between the Islamic and the non-Islamic appears to be as easy as identifying a person's communal identity by their name. Except, of course, when it is not. Names can be deceptive, they can be shared between traditions, claimed by one, known within another. In Vikram Seth's sprawling epic of post-partition India, *A Suitable Boy*, the protagonist Lata asks the man with whom she has just fallen passionately in love, 'Kabir, why didn't you tell me your last name?'^[1] She had been unaware, and had naïvely assumed him to be Hindu. Kabir, of course, is a name that defies exclusivity and that belongs to no one tradition. It is instead Kabir's last name, Durrani, which carries the evidence of his unsuitability.

Anand Vivek Taneja's *Jinnealogy* is about a corner of Delhi – a tiny space of ruination amidst the sprawling modern development of Delhi – in which names are consciously avoided and an intimacy sought with strangers that would not be possible if obvious markers of communal identity were known. In Taneja's ethnography, anonymity is a first step toward a form of hospitality and an openness to the other that is so often avoided in other less liminal parts of the megacity. The space of which he writes is the crumbling medieval fort of Firoz Shah Kotla. This is a ruin that is often overshadowed by the many other vestiges of Muslim rule that dot the landscape of contemporary Delhi. Firoz Shah Kotla's edifice lacks the spectacular impact of other heritage sites in Delhi, and its Ashokan pillar is frequently overshadowed by the mysteriously rust-proof iron pillar of Delhi that sits in the city's southern Qutb complex. In other words, Firoz Shah Kotla is easy to miss. Perhaps, if you have been to watch a test match in Delhi, you might recognize the fort's name from the more famous cricket ground to the north: perhaps you even walked past the ruins on your way to a match. But if you did, the chances are you failed to wander inside.

Originally built in the 14th century during the Tughlaq dynasty, the fortress is now under the control of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). As with so many of Delhi's monuments, the ASI maintains the fort as a place of leisure for Delhi's inhabitants, and it is surrounded by carefully kept gardens. As far as the ASI is concerned, Firoz Shah Kotla is thus preserved as a scenic piece of parkland amidst the modern city that surrounds it on all sides: it is treated as a picturesque background the city proper. And yet this notion of scenic backdrop elides the multiple claims that are made upon this space and the political will needed to produce Firoz Shah Kotla as yet another dead ruin in Delhi. In fact, contemporary Firoz Shah Kotla is both home to a fully functioning mosque (colonized, it turns out, by reformist Islam) as well as a more elusive group of inhabitants, the jinn, who are the object of popular worship by people from a wide variety of religious and social backgrounds.



Person kneeling reading book | Credit: [Pexels rawpixel.com](https://www.pexels.com/)

It is in the alcoves, the recesses and the subterranean spaces of Firoz Shah Kotla that Taneja encountered these jinn and the people who come to petition them. Most of these individuals are poor and marginalized. They know what it means to be seen as disposable, moveable and transient in a city that is developing as fast as Delhi. Indeed, it appears that these people only began to come to Firoz Shah Kotla after the forced displacements and slum clearances of the Indian Emergency, 1975-77. Indeed, the relatively recent blossoming of this parallel religious life highlights Firoz Shah Kotla's unusual nature as a site of religious experience, for while its patrons see it as a sacred *dargah* (shrine), it is unlike other North Indian *dargahs* in that it does not contain the grave of a saint. Instead, people come to be effected by the *jinn*, long-lived and ethereal spirits who are mentioned in the Qur'an and who are often thought to be extremely powerful, but whose exact nature frequently becomes a great source of concern for reformist Muslims who are forever on the look out for signs of innovation and intercession.

For the Hindus and Muslims who visit the *jinn* at Firoz Shah Kotla, however, such doctrinal anxieties are not present. Rather, they come to Firoz Shah Kotla as a place in which they might express desires that go against the (typically patriarchal) norms of communal life. Here, beneath the ruins, they place petitions into the crumbling alcoves of Firoz Shah Kotla in order to call for justice from the jinn, for the jinn are thought to have their own parallel system of government and bureaucracy through which these petitioners hope to achieve a more direct and intimate relationship to sovereignty than is possible in their dealings with the indifferent (and sometimes violent) postcolonial state. The jinn thus offer these people another way of being and another potential form of existence. Moreover, these jinn seem to promise another kind of justice, one that is anti-patriarchal, that is attentive to small voices, and that disregards the barriers and boundaries of communal existence. In Firoz Shah Kotla, people seek an ethical relation to the world that contradicts the normative morality of their everyday lives.

Herein lies one of the central (if implicit) themes of Taneja's book: a close association of the ethical with the idea of potentials and possibilities. The relations that people craft to the jinn are ethical because they open up new possibilities of relating to the world. Through their long memories and their persistence within the urban landscape – notwithstanding the 'amnesia' of the postcolonial state – the jinn offer up an alternative genealogy of the present. This is the *Jinnealogy* of the title. This *other-temporality*, which Taneja also describes as an 'elsewhen', contains the potential to remake the present, to provide an alternative vision of what the individual and his or her community might look like. It is the radical potential of the jinn as enabling us to imagine the world 'as if' that defines the boundaries of the ethical within Taneja's text. For many of the people who visit Firoz Shah Kotla on a weekly basis, social norms and communal morality are crushing weights within their lives. Although Taneja does not explore it in detail, there is a strong implication in his text that the ethical is necessarily tied to a promise of (or at least a potential for) liberation.

Due to its atypical history as a shrine without a grave, Firoz Shah Kotla is an unusual place; but as Taneja demonstrates, other aspects of what occurs there are very typical for a North Indian *dargah*. Within the academic literature, *dargahs* have often been celebrated as places that defy the simplistic idea that 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' must necessarily be essential and exclusive identities. They are, in other words, potent sites of analysis for they allow us scholars to critique the rigid worldviews of both reformist fanatics and populist politicians. For example, Carla Bellamy – a scholar who Taneja engages with at length – has written of *dargah* culture as a distinct religious culture that cannot be collapsed back into Hinduism, Islam or syncretism, a position that leads her to describe the shrine in which she conducted ethnography as ambiguously Islamic.^[2]

Taneja, however, does not use his ethnography only as a means to deconstruct religious essentialisms. Instead, he does something unexpected and invigorating: he uses the ambiguous religiosity of Firoz Shah Kotla as a means through which to articulate a very particular answer to the question of 'what is Islam?' Taneja, it would appear, is unwilling to cede the right to answer that question to his informants alone, be they communally-minded Muslims (who might paradoxically agree with the Hindu right in asserting that Islam is fundamentally separate from Indian culture) or elite residents of Delhi, whose well-intentioned desires to preserve Firoz Shah Kotla mean retaining the idea of Islam as 'heritage'. In many respects, Taneja's book can therefore be read as a rejoinder to anthropology's long-held refusal to define Islam, and as an attempt to do so in a way that does not lead to that definition being an act of exclusion. This book is a creative attempt to rethink and redefine Islam in South Asia, and it does so for explicitly ethical reasons, in so far as it aims to open up new possibilities by which we all might live with and relate to one another. It is an exercise in asking, 'what if?'

'Islam', Taneja tells us, 'spreads far beyond the limitations imposed by our modern conceptions of religion as coterminous with identity.'^[3] Instead, we have to start thinking of Islam as an ethical potential that lies beneath the surface of North Indian social life. In Firoz Shah Kotla, Taneja finds in Islam another way of relating to the past; another way of calling for justice; another possibility of being. In this sense, the argument of the book is radical, for Taneja is insisting that there is such a thing that we analysts should be identifying as Islam, and that this is not necessarily a definition that our interlocutors would be comfortable with. At times, he even seems to play with the idea that the normative and communitarian Islam practiced just yards from the jinn in the mosque of Firoz Shah Kotla should not really be considered *Islamic* at all, although he never quite takes his argument that far. Instead, Taneja insists that Islam should be read as an inheritance behind everyday life in India, one that is able to open up ethical possibilities in the contemporary lives of those from other traditions. As such, his act of defining Islam ceases to be an exclusionary undertaking, and becomes a process of recognizing the ways in which Islam is fundamental to contemporary ethical life in India. This is a recognition that Islam has bequeathed ethical possibilities to all Indians as they go about the enormous task of relating ethically to others.

Much of what Taneja writes comes from a place of sadness, a yearning for a city in which the sacred is not alienated from the natural, and in which the state's power to forget does not trample over the possibilities of ethical life. Central to this is a deep engagement with the idea of ruination, and a keen attentiveness to the way in which it can potentially function both to empty the urban landscape of enchantment and to enable new ways of imagining the links between past and present. The strengths of this book lie in Taneja's ability to connect the lives of his contemporary informants to longer histories of the Islamic in Delhi, and thus to uncover the minor histories that have bequeathed Islam its potential to disrupt contemporary norms. Very occasionally, Taneja's argument becomes a little over-stretched in this regard. In a remarkable chapter on the sexual politics of Firoz Shah Kotla, he describes how forms of equality are achieved through free and frank interactions between men and women. Responding to the question of how such interactions might occur within an 'Islamic' space, he delves into history to uncover a deep ambiguity within Islam, identified as an antipatriarchal element embedded within the religion. This 'anti-structure' goes back to Muhammad's relations with women, and manifests today in the reverence that people have for Firoz Shah Kotla's jinn as loving fathers of daughters, not sons. But, we might ask, is it really right to think of a space to which many men go solely in order to leer at women as straightforwardly anti-patriarchal? This is, however, only a minor quibble, and in no way detracts from the broader and very radical ethical goals of this book. *Jinnealogy* is a superbly detailed account of a form of religious life that many groups in India would rather silence or forget, for it complicates simplistic narratives of identity and belonging. Moreover, this book will no doubt open up a new chapter in anthropology in which ethnographers becomes less afraid of unashamedly entering into critical debates about what Islam is. As Taneja so eloquently shows, these are debates which we can perhaps no longer afford to leave to those whose answers will always imply exclusion.

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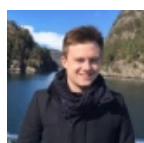
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