

## **A Displaced Hope**

Djinns are supernatural entities created out of smokeless fire, according to Islamic theology. I was born and raised in the Indian city of Lucknow, where the existence of Djinns with their supernatural powers is a common belief.

Superstition and Firoz Shah Kotla have been convergently linked for ages. The Kotla fortress in the Indian capital was built by Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq in the 14th century. Today, it's a ruin nestling between a cricket stadium and the city's ring road. It is within these ruins one finds the heart of Djinn worship.

According to the anthropologist and academic Anand Vivek Taneja, "It was right after the end of the Emergency period (1975-77) in Indira Gandhi's India that Firoz Shah Kotla came to prominence as a religious site in both popular memory and archival records. But the seeds of this practice were sown in the idealism of the post-independence Nehruvian era that gave way, from the mid-1960s to a darker time of betrayed hopes, floundering social policies, and growing militant unrest. Many of those who come to Firoz Shah Kotla, both Hindu and Muslim, are from the areas worst affected by the excesses of the Emergency: the working-class Muslim and Dalit neighbourhoods of Old Delhi, targeted by the state for evictions, forced sterilizations, religious persecution and demolitions. Yet their relation to the past, among these ruins, is not one of despair but of hope and healing. In the dreams and visions that direct them to these ruins, they see Muslim saints wearing archaic robes, harking back to the medieval past."

Thousands of people from all walks of life gather here every Thursday, praying, writing petitions, pasting coins, lighting candles and lamps to impress the Genies in exchange for a solution to their problems and a better life. In the alcoves of the fortress's stone walls, people can be seen inking and pasting handwritten letters and photocopies of their personal documents with passport-size photographs, hoping that their problems will be resolved with the blessings of the Djinns. They write their letters to them in a form reminiscent of the 'Shikwa', a Perso-Islamic legal form of directly addressing one's complaints to the sovereign, prominent in the political theory of the Delhi Sultanate- Anand Vivek Taneja.

A middle-aged woman, whom I encountered during one of my visits, asserted that the only reason her loved ones are hale and hearty is because she has been regularly visiting the fort every Thursday for the last 20 years. Another family whom I confronted during another visit, narrated that Sulaiman, a self-proclaimed Godmen, declared that the family's wishes and yearnings would be entertained in the court of the Djinns and fulfilled swiftly, depending upon how hefty an amount they would pay to him in Indian rupees.

A society that is completely ostracized due to political negligence, religious differences, unawareness and lack of justice has become just a money-making mechanism for the self-proclaimed Godmen in the fort, who exploit the misfortunes of these people. People bring in money, which is swept away in the name of blind superstition. These unaware devotees, who believe that Djinns have a cure for every woe of theirs, worship them and are

ruthlessly swindled by these Godmen who assert that their wish to end their woes will be heard by the Djinns, depending upon how much money a devotee will pay to them.

Women who are said to be possessed have to undergo exorcism, which only one or two family members who accompany them, witness and experience. During the ritual carried out by these Godmen, the women are brutally treated and manhandled. As the exorcism ritual progresses, these possessed women speak in a tone very different from their original voice. According to the Godmen, the Djinn who possess them speak stubbornly of not leaving the body. It also warns the family members holding the woman of harming them. The women cry, scream, scratch with their nails and bang their heads on the walls, some lying unconsciously in the alcoves of the fortress. However, this is not only pertaining to women but also men, who sometimes get under the grip of such supernatural forces.

People visiting these places do not have the tools of education to question these practices, indestructible devotion and their ignorant behaviour. The ending of a Thursday in Kotla is rather ironic. The letters and money left by the devotees are ruthlessly removed by the clerics working at the fort and the letters are burned by the workers of the Archeological Survey of India. The post-colonial administrative body whose laws and policies made it impossible for Muslim life worlds across Delhi (mosques, dargahs, etc) to remain as living spaces post-1947, thus the term 'monuments'. The money is divided amongst the clerics while the handwritten letters with the people's hope for a better life, end up in the garbage. Not only political laxity is responsible for this but religious altercation also plays a major role.

The project aims to explore what I was taught about Djinns while growing up and how it contradicts what is being practised at Kotla. It is a personal journal, a journey into the nostalgic space of my childhood lapsing into history, challenging the contemporary belief in the doctrines of a religion.

It is a visual ode to a mystical force that compels me to divulge reality and embrace superstition. It is an ardent longing to hold onto my culture, folklore, and upbringing and amalgamate my perception towards the modern world in spite of history and excessively credulous belief.

A Displaced Hope documents these injustices, blending personal experiences with a critique of contemporary beliefs and practices surrounding Djinn worship, superstition and the occupation of Muslim spaces post partition in India.