

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF FIROZ SHAH KOTLA

A SYNTHESIS BETWEEN THE SUPERNATURAL WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD

-Dr. Chandni Sengupta¹

Abstract

The medieval ruins of Firoz Shah Kotla are largely neglected as far as the monumental splendour of Delhi is concerned. Though these ruins are adjacent to the famous Kotla grounds, it does not attract as many visitors as the other monument complexes in the city. However, devotees and those seeking divine intervention consider Firoz Shah Kotla to be a place where prayers are heard and answered. Many people, mostly from the nearby areas, flock the ruins every Thursday and leave petitions for the jinns to fulfill their wishes. This article attempts to analyse the socio-cultural significance of the site of Firoz Shah Kotla in the lives of the people.

Keywords: Firoz Shah Kotla, jinns, rituals, practices, petitions, mannat, Thursday, divine

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University Haryana

Introduction

The historical relevance of Firoz Shah Kotla as a 14th century palace complex built by Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq is eclipsed by the ritualism associated with the place today. The understanding of it being a historical structure is absent at least among those who visit the site for religious purposes, and most of the people who visit the shrine today (apart from researchers and some tourists) are locals who come from the nearby areas and who visit the site to pray and accrue some material benefit in return. On being asked about its historical relevance (during the field work conducted as part of this study), most respondents were silent about the historicity of the structure and knew nothing at all about the site being a palace complex built by a Sultan.

The site is under the Archaeological Survey of India, and there are boards put up to inform visitors and tourists about the historical relevance of the place, however, the local visitors do not seem to have any idea about what the structure actually is. For them it is a site which is to be venerated. A visit to this medieval palace complex on Thursdays makes the site appear as a place where a large religious congregation is taking place. There are so many visitors at the site every Thursday that a headcount is not possible. The lawns are full of people and the pathways are packed with people walking around.

For most people who visit this structure, it is a place where *jinn*s reside and where their prayers are heard. The place is venerated as a dargah or a holy shrine. The nature of this holy shrine is, however, different from the other Sufi shrines of the city. All the other dargahs of the city are built around the grave of a pious Muslim saint. At Firoz Shah Kotla, however, there are no graves or *mazars*. There is not even the slightest resemblance to a dargah. In fact, there is no specific spot which is considered to be having miraculous powers. At a number of places in the

complex one can notice lighted lamps, incense sticks, floral offerings, and people's petitions tied to barks of trees or placed near the niches and alcoves asking for favours from the *jinns*. The site looks more like an abandoned, ruined space.

A place for seeking divine favours from the jinns

It is interesting to see the number of people who visit the site for seeking divine favours. Most of the people who visit the site come every Thursday and have a firm belief in the miraculous powers of the *jinns* that are supposed to reside in the palace complex. The visitors believe that these *jinns* or holy spirits hear their prayers and grant their wishes. On being asked about the absence of graves at the site, most of the respondents felt that though there were no graves and though it did not officially qualify as a dargah, but the miraculous powers with which their wishes have been or will be granted is no less than the miracles performed by a saint.

Before attempting to analyse the socio-religious context within which the site is being studied, it is important to understand the concept of *jinns* and how people relate to this concept or have understood it in the past. According to Islamic belief, *jinns* are a distinct species that are superior to humans. They are supposed to be physically stronger than humans, and they are supposed to possess the power of travelling long distances at a very high speed. At Firoz Shah Kotla, these *jinns* are supposed to be mobile, they are supposed to be travelling all the time, and when the place gets too crowded, they are believed to disappear into oblivion. In Islamic belief, *jinns*, like human being, are mortal but live longer than human beings, and are believed to be created by fire while humans are created from earth.

At Firoz Shah Kotla, the *jinns* are revered as saints, hence the term 'jinn-saints' can also be used to denote these mythical supernatural creatures that have created a world of their own in one of

the most fascinating medieval ruins of Delhi. Firoz Shah Kotla has been associated with *jinns* and stories about the existence of ‘friendly’ *jinns* that help people overcome their miseries are found in abundance. Most of the frequent visitors to the site claim to have had their wishes fulfilled by these supernatural figures and some others believe that their prayers will be heard soon. As part of this research, 50 people were interviewed at the site and many of them narrated the story of how their wishes were granted by the *jinns*. Many of them espoused strong faith in the miraculous powers of the *jinns* who would one day grant their wishes and end their miseries. Whether myth or reality, the site is definitely viewed by people as a place of worship in which holy spirits reside and effectively help them in getting rid of their material problems. Like in the case of Sultan Ghari, it is belief that is guiding the devotees though the site is not a shrine as far as the standard definition of a shrine is concerned, it is definitely venerated as such.

Some people who were interviewed claimed that this was the only place where their petitions are heard and where justice is done. They claimed that ‘yahan pe insaaf hota hai’ meaning that here justice is done. It is interesting to note how their belief in the justice system of the *jinns* is greater than their belief in any other justice system prevalent in the country. The *jinns*, for them, are judges who pronounce their verdict at a greater speed than the ones sitting behind the closed doors of the court rooms. There is a certain kind of disappointment that reflects in the voices of many who visit the site—disappointment emanating from poor living conditions, lack of job, lack of security, lack of belongingness.

Socio-religious profile of visitors and devotees

In order to analyse the social and religious composition of the people who visit the site, it is important to first understand that most of the people come from the areas surrounding the site,

i.e. Old Delhi and its neighbouring suburbs like Paharganj. People also come in large numbers from East Delhi (areas situated across the River Yamuna). As far as social profile of the people is concerned, most of the people belong to the lower strata of society, mostly Muslims belonging to the lower sections of the social order.

As far as the professional affiliations of the visitors is concerned, most of them are either petty traders or people who work in the artisanal enterprises—carpenters, tailors, barbers, mechanics, etc. Muslim women who visit the site are mostly housewives who are either accompanied by their male family members, distant relatives or friends. As far as the religious affiliation of the visitors is concerned, like all shrines in the city, this site is also visited by both Hindus and Muslims, though the number of Muslim visitors are far greater in number than members of any other community. Out of the 50 respondents interviewed as part of the field study, 47 were Muslims and only 3 were Hindu. Unlike Sultan Ghari where the number of Hindu visitors surpasses the Muslim visitors, at Firoz Shah Kotla the number of Muslims is much higher than the number of Hindus.

It is logical to include an analysis of how the visitors at Firoz Shah Kotla perceive Sufism. What is their understanding of mysticism and is it only here that they come for fulfilling their spiritual and temporal needs or do they visit other shrines in the city as well? Most people who visit this site are 'loyalists' in the sense of visiting only this place repeatedly week after week for many years. Some visit the dargahs in the old city (for example, the shrine of Shah Turkman) but largely their spiritual quest is restricted to worshipping the jinn-saints at Firoz Shah Kotla.

Out of the 50 respondents interviewed as part of this study, 33 said that they only visited Firoz Shah Kotla and have been visiting this site for many years, 9 said that they visit other shrines in

the old city, and claimed that they have visited the famous Chishti shrines of Delhi. The majority of the respondents were locals who visited only this site and owed allegiance to the jinn-saints. Some of them spoke about their spiritual quest at this site while other spoke about their journey to the other side of Delhi to visit the shrines of the 'greater' Chishti saints, however, a large majority of them believed in the miracles that had taken place in their lives as a result of their faith in the *jinns* of Firoz Shah Kotla.

Ritual practices at Firoz Shah Kotla

The purpose of people visiting the site is clear, they visit Firoz Shah Kotla in order to get their prayers heard, and therefore, *mannat* is what they ask for at the side with a firm belief that their prayers will be granted soon by the jinn-saints. Out of the 50 respondents, the *mannat* of 36 had already been fulfilled and 14 had been visiting the site for the past couple of weeks with the intention that one day (sooner or later) their wishes too will be granted. A remarkable feature of the *mannat* tradition at Firoz Shah Kotla is writing letters to *jinns*. People write whatever they wish for on pieces of paper and leave it in the niches and alcoves of the ruined structures within the complex. They also tie petitions on a few barren trees inside the precincts of the structure.

Interestingly, some students leave their syllabi and photocopied versions of their book covers in the niches so that they can be blessed by the *jinns*. Most of the paper slips seem to be like petitions that are presented in a court of justice. On interviewing some people who are regular visitors at the site, it was found that the general understanding among the people is that the *jinns* who reside here have a government of their own. One respondent claimed that 'yahan unki sarkar chalti hai' meaning that here the government of the *jinns* rules. Therefore, the submission of these petitions (in the form of *mannat*) is something that can be attributed to this understanding

which places a greater responsibility on the shoulders of the jinn-saints who are then supposed to pass a judgment in their court of law. The petitions are accompanied with detailed names, addresses and in some cases photographs are also attached. The letters are often photocopied and these photocopied versions are left in different alcoves, similar to the petitions submitted to a government office.

People leave their petitions to be read by the jinn-saints every Thursday night, some of them come repeatedly and submit the same petition, waiting for the *jinnns* to read them soon and deliver their justice. According to popular belief, every Thursday night when the site is deserted, the jinn-saints read the petitions left by the people. This is the image of justice that persists among the people at Firoz Shah Kotla. The most sought after structure in the complex is a pyramid of cells, which is also the most visible structure with the complex. Locals who visit the site believe it to be the main inhabitation of the *jinnns*. This is the place where the maximum amount of letters/petitions are found and people light candles and incense sticks to propitiate the *jinnns*. Grain and milk in earthen pots are also visible throughout the vast expanse of the pyramid of cells.

As far as the periodicity of shrine visitations is concerned, most people visit the site every Thursday. Out of the 50 respondent, 39 claimed that they have been visiting the site every Thursday for over 12 years, and 6 claimed that they come once a month to submit their petition, hoping that their prayers will be heard soon. Three visitors claimed that they come to the site only to pray as it is considered to be a Holy place and that they do not ask for any *mannat*. They said that they visit the place in order to pray for the general good of their family and near and dear ones. The remaining visitors were first-time visitors who had been inspired by their distant

relatives to visit the site in order to get their wishes fulfilled. They were convinced that the *jinns* at Firoz Shah Kotla will grant them whatever they would ask for.

The main offerings made by people at Firoz Shah Kotla include milk, grain, flowers, sweets, candles, and incense sticks. Unlike Sultan Ghari and other shrines of the city, food is not distributed at the site. There are many food vendors who set up their stalls every day and mostly on Thursdays outside the gates, but there is no fair or festivity that is organized at this site. People come, pray, leave their petitions and go back. There is definitely a deep sense of bonding that they share with the place but that is not manifested in the outward show of festivity or charity as is the case with most other shrines of the city.

Table: Numerical analysis of visitations at Firoz Shah Kotla

Sr. No.	Category	Numerical Data
1.	Reasons for pilgrimage	36- <i>mannat</i> already fulfilled 14- asked for <i>mannat</i> (yet to be fulfilled)
2.	Periodicity of visitations	39- visit every Thursday 8-visit once a month (on Thursday) 3- visit once in a while (once in 2-3 months)
3.	Religious affiliations of visitors	47-Muslims 3-Hindus
4.	Visiting other shrines	33- visit only Firoz Shah Kotla 9- visit some shrines in the old city 8- have visited the famous Chishti shrines

**The total number of respondents were 50*

Conclusion

From an analysis of visitation at the site of Firoz Shah Kotla in Delhi is becomes evident that though the site is not essentially a s shrine or a mazar, it is revered and venerated by people, both Hindus and Muslims, in the city of Delhi. It is a site where the supernatural and real come together and combine to create a magnificent synthesis of Sufi practice and ritual obligations. The Firoz Shah Kotla is, therefore, a place of confluence between ‘this worldly’ and the ‘other worldly,’ and has over many centuries assumed great significance in the lives of the visitors and devotees.

References

Primary Sources

Barani, Zia ad-din, *Tarikh i-Firoz Shahi*, translated in Hindi from original Persian by S.A.A. Rizvi, *Tughlaq Kaleen Bharat*, part I, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1956

Dehlvi, Abd al-Haq Muhaddith, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, Maktaba Jamia Ltd., Delhi

Firishta, Muhammad Ibrahim, *Tarikh i-Firishta* (4 volumes), translated into English by J. Briggs, London, 1892

Tughlaq, Firoz Shah, *Futuhāt i-Firoz Shahi*, translated in Hindi from original Persian by S.A.A. Rizvi, *Tughlaq Kaleen Bharat*, part II, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1957

Khan, Dargah Quli, *Muraqqa e-Dehli*, translated into English by Chander Shekhar and Shama Mitra Chenoy, Deputy Publications, Delhi, 1989

Hasan, Maulvi Zafar, *Monuments of Delhi: Lasting Splendour of the Great Mughals and Others*, vol. IV, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 1920 (English Translation)

Khan, Sir Syed Ahmad, *Aasar ud-Sanadeed*, Urdu Academy, New Delhi (reprint 2006)

Archival Sources

Conservation Notes on Archaeological Buildings in Delhi Province, by G. Sanderson, Superintendent, Muhammadan and British Monuments, Northern Circle, Series I, Delhi Superintendent Govt. Printing India, 1914

Buildings of Architectural Interest, Residency Register No. 2 Misc. Documents, year 1829 to 1876, dated 6 December 1872

The Condition of Monuments of Delhi and Suggested Measures, Residency Register No. 2 Misc. Documents, year 1829 to 1876, dated 24 May 1865

Gazetters

The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. XI: Coondapoor to Edwardesabad, Clarendon Press, 1908

Gazetteer of Delhi District, Delhi Administration, Delhi, 1935

Delhi Gazetteer, Delhi Gazetteer Unit, Delhi Administration, Delhi, 1976

Delhi Gazetteer, Delhi Gazetteer Unit, Delhi Administration, Delhi, 1980

Gazetteer of Rural Delhi, edited by Dr. Uma Prasad Thapliyal, Delhi University Press, Delhi, 1987

Gazetteer of the Delhi District, compiled and published under the authority of the Punjab government, 1883-84, Vintage Books, 1988 (second edition)

Delhi Gazette, Government of India, Part IV, 1892

Directory of Wakf Properties in Union Territory of Delhi, Serial No. 949 to 1045 and 1065 to 1075, Delhi Waqf Board records