

Book Review

Tareen, SherAli. *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire*. 360pp. Columbia University Press 2023

Dr Tariq Suleman¹

¹ PhD (SOAS University of London)

E-mail: t.suleman@bloomsburypakistan.org

Published: May 2025

SherAli Tareen's *Perilous Intimacies* is a masterfully crafted and methodologically ambitious intervention into the intellectual history of South Asian Islam. Rejecting familiar binaries—pluralist versus puritan, inclusive versus exclusive, secular versus theological—Tareen shifts our attention to a more intricate ethical landscape: the grammar of “friendship” (*dosti*) as sacred entanglement. Through careful readings of major Muslim thinkers—Shah Waliullah, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Qasim Nanautvi, Ahmad Raza Khan, Abdul Bari of Farangi Mahal, Shibli Nu'mani, Abu'l Kalam Azad, and Qari Tayyib—Tareen reconstructs a discursive archive where political rupture, theological boundary-making, and moral intimacy are deeply intertwined.

What emerges is neither a romantic vision of interreligious harmony nor a simple critique of conflict, but a textured and ethical portrait of Muslim scholarly engagements with difference in an era marked by imperial decline and colonial reordering. For Tareen, friendship is not a private sentiment but a public theological posture—one that negotiates asymmetry and reclaims difference as a space for ethical labour. His most powerful insight lies in showing how, as sovereignty receded, Muslim scholars reasserted distinction through ritual, theology, and moral hierarchies. This move—from political to performative sovereignty—was a deliberate rearticulation under the pressures of colonial modernity, though not without contradictions.

Yet the book's strength also opens its critical fault lines. Tareen's focus on elite theological discourse, while illuminating, underplays the material and symbolic violence that reshaped everyday intercommunal relations. The colonial state's technologies—censuses, codified laws, separate electorates—hardened identities in ways that far

exceeded theological intention. While Tareen gestures toward these shifts, the translation of theological ideals into lived realities remains an underdeveloped theme.

Shahab Ahmed reminds us that Islam has always encompassed a tension between doctrinal rigidity and lived pluralism. Theological frameworks must be read not as fixed dogmas but as evolving idioms—responsive to justice, context and coexistence. What is needed now is not a return to premodern paradigms, but a forward-looking ethical politics grounded in historical awareness and contemporary urgency.

Moreover, the ulama's enduring commitment to symbolic superiority and imperial memory left them ill-equipped for the demands of colonial modernity: mass education, democratic representation, and economic restructuring. The traditions they preserved often failed to prepare Muslim publics for the radically transformed political terrain they inhabited. This intellectual posture, as Tareen shows, continues to reverberate in the marginalisation and political disorientation of many South Asian Muslim communities today.

Among the book's most provocative contributions is the notion of “sacred entanglement”—a challenge to secular visions of pluralism that reduce coexistence to tolerance or neutrality. Tareen argues that friendship after empire demands not the erasure of difference but its transformation into ethical intimacy. Yet this vision must be measured against present realities: majoritarian nationalism, caste hierarchies, and global Islamophobia. Can sacred entanglement become more than a lofty ideal in a world structured by inequality? Can it become a viable framework for justice?

Tareen's refusal to offer closure is a strength. His work calls for new conversations that connect theological traditions to political praxis, centre subaltern voices, and reckon with lived experiences. If the ulama failed in the past to respond to the institutional transformations of their time, the question before us is urgent: can we afford to repeat that failure?

It is precisely here that the review must pivot—not to diminish Tareen's accomplishment, but to extend its implications. *Perilous Intimacies* is a landmark in South Asian intellectual history, but it also reveals the limitations of a tradition often tethered to imperial nostalgia and symbolic distinction. While Tareen reconstructs theological visions with fidelity and care, he stops short of interrogating how these visions addressed—or evaded—the challenges of political coexistence in a radically altered world. Without addressing the material infrastructures of inequality, sacred entanglement risks becoming an evocative metaphor rather than a transformative practice. If friendship after empire is to have political traction, it must confront the legacies of hierarchy and insecurity that continue to shape Muslim political discourse.

Tareen offers a compelling account of how Muslim scholars imagined and contested the boundaries of Hindu-Muslim friendship. Yet their commitment to symbolic distinctiveness—rather than political adaptability—proved historically costly. Rather than negotiating a place within a shared polity, Muslim leadership increasingly gravitated toward separation. As Farzana Shaikh has argued, Muslim separatism may stem not only from colonial engineering but also from internal theological claims to exclusivity. If Muslim identity has historically been tethered to the notion of sovereignty, then its loss may foster ritualised forms of separation. In the postcolonial period, Muslim political discourse in South Asia has struggled to move beyond these paradigms, often at the expense of democratic engagement. While Tareen's invocation of "sacred entanglement" remains powerful, it demands critical interrogation. He recovers the ethical grammar of friendship, but whether this can animate a just intercommunal politics today remains an open question.

The anxieties that once shaped Muslim political strategy—particularly fears of demographic subjugation—continue to echo. Even federalist solutions failed to address deeper insecurities around identity and sovereignty. Jan-i Janan's translation of Hinduism, however intellectually generous, was conditioned by imperial decline and was unable to anticipate the epistemic rupture introduced by colonial rule. These inherited frameworks—never recalibrated—now risk ossifying into reactive postures rather than offering pathways to pluralist futures.

One of the most critical absences in Muslim scholarly traditions during colonial rule was the failure to register the

transformation of sovereignty—from elite guardianship to mass political participation. As colonialism redefined power and codified religious identity, many Muslim scholars continued to offer responses anchored in imperial frameworks of moral authority and ritual distinction. Theirs was a discourse premised on shepherding a shrinking community, not engaging a transforming polity. While Hindu reformers engaged with emerging democratic institutions, Muslim thinkers largely remained tethered to elite authority, seeking to preserve a besieged moral community, unable to reimagine Islam's place in a democratising, post-imperial world.

Qari Mohammad Tayyib's theory of *tashabbuh*—the prohibition against imitation of non-Muslims—captures this ethos of defensive distinction. For Tayyib, the loss of power made even desirable traits of the Other appear corrupting; imitation, in this framework, meant spiritual erosion. His solution was to guard Islamic identity through ritual purity and rejection of the non-Muslim Other. But this was less a political strategy and more a metaphysical insulation. As Ussama Makdisi has shown, Islamic theological superiority once coexisted with a premodern hierarchy of coexistence. But under colonial modernity, where equality was professed but not practised, and representative governance redefined identity and belonging, such notions became untenable and politically counterproductive.

What many Muslim scholars failed to grasp was not simply the loss of sovereignty, but a seismic shift in what sovereignty meant. They continued to speak the language of empire in a world demanding the idioms of democratic equality. The result was profound: it left Muslims politically reactive, discursively insulated, and increasingly alienated from the institutions shaping collective futures.

Ultimately, *Perilous Intimacies* is not the end of a conversation but its provocation. Tareen reminds us that the past is not a script to recite, but a grammar to rewrite. If friendship is to matter after empire, it must move beyond symbolic piety to become an ethic of shared struggle—one rooted in justice, vulnerability, and the dismantling of structures that make friendship itself so perilous.